

**THE RACIALIZATION OF DAY LABOR WORK IN THE U.S. LABOR  
MARKET: EXAMINING THE EXPLOITATION OF IMMIGRANT LABOR**

A Dissertation

by

AURELIA LORENA MURGA

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

August 2011

Major Subject: Sociology

The Racialization of Day Labor Work in the U.S. Labor Market: Examining the  
Exploitation of Immigrant Labor

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Chair of Committee,	Rogelio Saenz
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## **ABSTRACT**

The Racialization of Day Labor Work in the U.S. Labor Market: Examining the  
Exploitation of Immigrant Labor. (August 2011)

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Chair of Advisory Committee: Dr. Rogelio Saenz

In early October 2005, just over a month after Hurricane Katrina devastated the gulf coast region of the United States, New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin asked local business leaders how he was to ensure that the city was not overrun by Mexican workers. These remarks vocalized the concerns of many regarding Latino immigrant workers to post-Katrina New Orleans. Likewise, they foreshadowed the obstacles faced by Latino reconstruction workers in the city. This dissertation examines Latino day labor participation in New Orleans, Louisiana by focusing on the racialized experiences of immigrant reconstruction workers. There is an established literature on racial/ethnic immigrant labor market inequality, addressing Latino wage penalties and occupational segregation as well as recent studies focusing on the gendered and racialized experiences of Latina and Chicana domestic workers in the U.S. However, established demographic research on day labor participation in the U.S. has failed to capture fully how day laborers experience “race” and how this has impacted their integration into the labor market.

The broad questions guiding this dissertation are: “What are the racialized experiences of day laborers?”; “How does the process of racialization shape the work experiences of day laborers?”; “How do day laborers negotiate these experiences and interactions with co-workers, employers, and their community?” This dissertation focused on a 23 month ethnographic research and 31 in-depth semi-structured interviews with Latino day laborers in post-Katrina New Orleans. This research underscores the crucial role that Latino day laborers play as non-standard workers in a racialized labor market, historically organized along a black/white continuum. The findings demonstrated day laboring is a process that takes place in racialized spaces, where day laborers exert emotional work. Findings also demonstrated how “race” impacts the day-to-day work experiences of day laborers, and how immigration status is a racialized social characteristic that allows for exploitation of immigrant workers. Finally, this dissertation examined the resistance strategies used by day laborers, and their organizing efforts toward achieving social justice in post-Katrina New Orleans.

## **DEDICATION**

Para mi Mamá y Papá. Para los trabajadores inmigrantes y sus familias. Y para todas/os los que me han inspirado a aprender, trabajar, y pelear por la justicia social.

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Special thanks to participants of the Race and Ethnicity Workshop at Texas A&M University, the Race and Ethnic Studies Institute (RESI) at Texas A&M University, the Summer Doctoral Fellows Program at Washington State University, and all my professors and colleagues in the Department of Sociology at Texas A&M University. Many thanks and appreciation to those who guided me and fostered a critical understanding of sociology throughout the years, with special thanks to: Glenn Bracey, Rosalind Chou, Kristen Lavelle, Chris Chambers, Karen Glover, Ruth

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**NOMENCLATURE**

CBD	Central Business District
DHS	Department of Homeland Security
ICE	Immigration and Customs Enforcement
NOWCRJ	New Orleans Workers' Center for Racial Justice

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

People often ask me how I came about doing dissertation work in New Orleans. It is all due to a series of fortunate events. I received a mass e-mail from Dr. Joe Feagin, a professor in our department, informing graduate students and professors about an Immigrant and Refugee Rights Conference being held in Houston, Texas. Thanks to that e-mail I attended a January conference, during a time when sociology was, honestly, soothing I was a bit disillusioned with; I have no doubt that this is something graduate students feel at one point or another during their tenure in graduate school. During one of the first sessions of that conference I attended a workshop on day laboring in post-Katrina New Orleans. I had already been speaking with day laborers in Texas and thought that hearing from day laborers in New Orleans would provide me with more information about day laboring, as well as a comparative situation between the two groups. I walked in and sat down near the back of the room. I gave a quick glance around the room, surveying the audience, and noticed a fairly wide range of attendees, the majority of whom were people of color.

As the session began a young man, who identified himself as an “academic,” walked up to the front of the room and began to speak, providing his credentials and informing the audience of how he was going to tell us about the experiences of day laborers in New Orleans. Suddenly from the back of the room a young man, and then

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This dissertation follows the style and format of *American Sociological Review*.

another interrupted him by saying, “He doesn’t know what he’s talking about, he’s not a day laborer!” As they were saying this they began walking up toward the front of the room. The “academic” tried to discredit them; spouting off his credentials while the young Latinos—the workers—were heading toward the front of the room. Suddenly, a young woman who was interpreting at the session walked toward them trying to diffuse the situation, which seemed to be getting a bit heated. The audience seemed perplexed. I gave a quick glance around the room, accessing others’ reactions to what was happening. Finally, the young workers reached the “academic” and carried him out of the room. Attendees had expressions of bewilderment on their faces, what exactly was happening here? We were not quite sure. After a few moments we were all let in on the situation as a young Latino stood at the front of the room introducing himself as a day labor organizer in New Orleans. He, along with the rest of the men, would be facilitating the workshop and speaking to us about the experiences of day laborers. Who better, he said, to inform us of the day-to-day occurrences of day laboring in post-Katrina New Orleans.

The workers went on to conduct the rest of the session. They asked audience members to participate in the workshop by forming groups scattered throughout the room. They provided us with vignettes that had been written by New Orleans day laborers. We were to dramatize the experiences with the members of our groups and perform them in front of the other participants in the workshop. This was quite different from any other conference I had attended. Certainly my tenure as a graduate student had led to my attendance at several academic conferences throughout the years. However,

the day labor workshop was much more engaging; it made me think and feel differently about the communities I was interested in “studying.” I was hearing from the people whose experiences I was interested in learning about, they were right in front of me, and they were the ones educating us about what day laboring was about, the hardships experienced on the corners, and how workers feel about day laboring.

By the end of the weekend I met with some of the workers, and they invited me to visit them in New Orleans. They said, “If you’re interested in day laborers you should come and talk to us.” Consequently, three years after Hurricane Katrina hit the gulf coast region of the U.S. on August 29, 2005, and once journalists, academics, and the general public’s interest in the rebuilding of the city began to wane; I took workers up on their offer and in July 2008 I moved to New Orleans to conduct dissertation research with day laborers in post-Katrina New Orleans.

This dissertation examines the experiences of Latino day laborers—workers seeking employment in open-air hiring sites—on the corners, or *esquinas*, of post-Katrina New Orleans. Although day labor work occurs in various cities across the country with “approximately 117,600 workers...either looking for day-labor jobs or working as day laborers” on any given day (Valenzuela, Theodore, Meléndez, and Gonzalez 2006:i) the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina highlighted the way in which the social construction of “race” and the process of racialization worked in creating, reproducing, and sustaining exploitative power dynamics in the labor market. The notion of “race” as a socially constructed category, as Bonilla-Silva (2003:8) explains “means that notions of racial difference are human creations rather than eternal, essential

categories” that “have a history and are subject to change.” That is, race, as Conley (2011:308) states, “refers to a group of people who share a set of characteristics—typically, not always, physical ones—and are said to share a common bloodline.” These social characteristics were created in order to assign social importance and justify privileges and dominance by whites over people of color, who are thought to possess “undesirable or inferior traits” (Feagin and Feagin 2003:5). Furthermore, racialization involves the “process of creating a race, such as Latinos; [and] also injecting a racial element into a situation” (Delgado and Stefancic 2001:154). That is, while ethnic minorities may be defined as such because of shared language or customs, these social elements are racialized by the dominant group in society. They are given racial meanings and importance (see Chapter II).

This leads us to critically examine the significance that race has on people’s social realities (Bonilla-Silva 2003). The real effects impacting people’s social realities Bonilla-Silva (2003) argues should be contextualized within racial structures. That is, racial structures, or racialized social systems, were created in order to privilege whiteness or white supremacy, which “affected all societies where Europeans extended their reach” (Bonilla-Silva 2003:9). Thus, members of the dominant race (e.g., whites) benefit from the privileges of whiteness, whether these are material or psychological, and are maintained and reproduced within social systems (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Feagin 2001). As a result, Latino immigrant workers in New Orleans are not alone in the way they experience poor working conditions in day labor work, but New Orleans’s day laborers highlight the stark reality of how the U.S. government, as racialized social

system, supports the exploitation of immigrant labor, workers of color, and how the consequences of these actions impact the realities of immigrant workers to the U.S—in this case, day laborers.

Indeed, in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina the George W. Bush administration passed an executive order on September 8, 2005 suspending the Davis Bacon Act for a 90 day period. The Davis Bacon Act required the payment of prevailing wages on federally funded construction projects (Browne-Dianis, Lai, Hincapie, and Soni 2006; Goldfarb and Morrall 1981). As a result, contractors were only required to pay the prevailing wages in the gulf states of Louisiana and Mississippi, where wages were already low, indeed far below the national average (Browne-Dianis et al. 2006). For instance, Browne-Dianis et al. (2006:33) note that “before Hurricane Katrina, the prevailing wage rates for construction workers in Mississippi and Louisiana were the lowest and the fifteenth lowest, respectively, in the United States.” Likewise, as Redwood (2008/2009) notes the Bush administration awarded labor contracts that were subsequently subcontracted multiple times over providing employers with the opportunities to exploit vulnerable reconstruction workers. Moreover, as Browne-Dianis et al. (2006:33) outline in a report titled *And Injustice for All: Workers’ Lives in the Reconstruction of New Orleans* days before the suspension of the Davis Bacon Act, on September 6, 2005 the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) “suspended sanctions for employers who failed to verify the work authorization of their employees as required under federal immigration law. DHS reinstated this requirement on October 21, 2005.”



Consequently, soon after Katrina Latino/a immigrants “constituted 25 percent of construction workers” (Johnson 2008:15). The federal government had essentially waived any sanctioning of federal contractors hiring of undocumented workers. These actions are linked to the historic and contemporary racist systems that people of color in the United States experience and are personally affected by on a daily basis. They speak of the exploitative practices affecting workers of color, and in this particular examination of Latino immigrants, in the United States, who find themselves embedded in racist social systems, such as the labor market (Bonilla-Silva 1997; Feagin 2001).

These federal practices directly affected the conditions that workers found themselves in as they labored to rebuild New Orleans. Day laborers were directly impacted by the actions taken by the federal government. Latino immigrants were some of the first responders to migrate to New Orleans in the aftermath of Katrina (Fussell 2009a). They lived and labored in unsanitary and hazardous conditions and, in most cases, worked without the appropriate safety equipment needed in their daily work environments. For instance, on August 30, 2005, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) “suspend[ed] enforcement of job safety and health standards in a number of counties and parishes affected by the Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, claiming it would be able to respond more effectively to workers involved in cleanup and recovery efforts” (Browne-Dianis et al. 2006:33). Like other groups of immigrant workers to the U.S. who have been seen and treated as disposable labor (Rodriguez 2004), Latina/o immigrant workers to New Orleans proved to be a stark example of how immigrant labor is exploited in the U.S. The federal government disregarded the health

outcomes of reconstruction workers, especially of immigrant workers, who instead became the *Other*—those that were framed as stealing jobs from New Orleanians (Browne-Dianis et al. 2006). Indeed, as Browne-Dianis et al. (2006:12) point out, Senator Mary Landrieu stated in October 2005 that it was “unconscionable that illegal workers would be brought into Louisiana aggravating our employment crisis and depressing earnings for our workers.” Consequently, the senator requested that DHS “institute a zero tolerance policy for the use of illegal workers in government contracts for reconstruction” (Browne-Dianis et al. 2006:12). As a result, immigrant workers who had begun to spearhead the rebuilding of New Orleans were the ones held accountable and blamed for these actions, instead of the federal government who had facilitated the employment and exploitation of immigrant workers to the gulf states.

Unfortunately, in New Orleans as Johnson (2008:16) illustrates immigrants who came to the city “to help rebuild were accused of taking jobs from African Americans, as well as threatening the city’s future racial identity.” The xenophobic image was created and established. Latino immigrants were labeled as *Mexicans*—or “illegal aliens”—and as the ones taking jobs away from Black New Orleanians, who had been displaced from their homes with little knowledge of when they would be allowed to return to the city. Federal, state, and local government officials fueled any animosity felt by New Orleanians who were experiencing the undergirded realities of systemic racism toward Latino immigrants. There was a framing of “us” versus “them” as reconstruction of New Orleans began to take shape (Browne-Dianis et al. 2006).

This dissertation research began three years after the storm of August 29, 2005. Three years after a national spotlight was held on the gulf coast region of the U.S., and particularly on New Orleans, I examine the reconstruction of the city by Latino day laborers. These are reconstruction workers who first responded to the labor demands in the city and who worked under the most egregious of circumstances as the rebuilding of New Orleans began to take shape (Fussell 2009a). They also worked during a time when Latino reconstruction workers experienced a change in the way they were viewed and portrayed by federal, state, and local governments. Indeed, as Browne-Dianis et al. (2006) point out, soon after Latino workers began to rebuild the city the “script” of how these workers were spoken about began to change, as they were being framed by politicians and the media as “illegal” immigrants who were stealing jobs away from U.S.-born workers (Browne-Dianis et al. 2006:12). Indeed, as the federal government facilitated the exploitation of immigrant labor it likewise quickly sought to clean-up its own mess by deploying

over 725 personnel to the Gulf, including approximately 400 special agents from the Office of Investigations, 200 officers from Federal Protective Services, and 100 officers from Detention and Removal Operations. ICE also sent ‘eight Special Response Teams (tactical law enforcement teams) comprised of highly trained armed personnel from the Office of Investigations and Detention and Removal Operations’ (Browne-Dianis et al. 2006:33).

These governmental actions prove to be a part of the way in which systemically racist acts are supported and maintained within racist social systems. These exploitative power

dynamics are not new in the United States, as history has proven. They are sustained and reproduced with the support of government power. In particular, immigrant labor, and in this case day laborers, in post-Katrina New Orleans are proof of the systemically racist processes and systems that allow for the framing of people as “illegal aliens” and blaming them for “stealing” the jobs of U.S. native-born workers. Moreover, it speaks to the lack of humanity with which Americans speak of immigrants and the stolen-dignity and criminalization of immigrant workers in the United States.

### **Summary of Introduction**

The aftermath of Hurricane Katrina proved to be devastating in a number of ways. The storm revealed the stark realities of systemic racism in the United States as the lives of New Orleanians were destroyed. Black New Orleanians were “given one-way tickets out of town, dispersed to every state in the union minus everything they owned” (Sublette 2008:310). They were (and are continuously being) shut out of the opportunities to rebuild their lives in New Orleans. For instance, Bullard (2006:21) argues that the creation of a whiter New Orleans has been promoted by “concentrating on getting less-damaged neighborhoods up and running [which] could translate into a smaller, more upscale, and whiter New Orleans and a dramatically down-sized black community.” These actions subsequently impact black New Orleanians’ voting, which translates to political power, and black wealth (Bullard 2006). It speaks of the continuous disenfranchisement of communities of color in the U.S. Indeed, as Sublette (2008:310) notes Black New Orleanians were disenfranchised in a “blatantly partisan act of destruction of African American political power, part of the quest to create a

permanent one-party Republican state.” The fact remains that “only 21% of black evacuees have returned [to New Orleans], compared with 48% of whites” (Bullard 2006:21). These social and political realities have impacted the reconstruction of New Orleans, how the city is being rebuilt and who is exploited in the rebuilding process.

Those overseeing the reconstruction process (e.g., federal, state, and local government and contractors) have systemically kept Black New Orleanians from participating in the rebuilding of their city. Likewise, they have taken advantage of exploiting Latino immigrant labor—those who have been identified as cheap, disposable workers. Indeed, Latino reconstruction workers in New Orleans have labored under toxic and hazardous working conditions, are systemically underpaid or not paid for their work, and are criminalized by local authorities in the city they have helped rebuild. Consequently, this dissertation examines how “race” has impacted the lived realities of Latino immigrant day laborers in post-Katrina New Orleans.

### **Outline of Remaining Chapters**

The following chapter sketches a brief background of the migration history of New Orleans. Although the history is complex and dynamic, I outline some of the main periods of migration relevant to framing the experiences of day laborers residing in post-Katrina New Orleans. The chapter also provides an examination of the current literature on immigrant work, racialization, and day labor work in the United States. The literature on immigrant work is vast and has sought to address the diversity of issues experienced by immigrant workers in the United States. Likewise, the literature on racialization has examined the complexities of how the social construction of race and ethnicity function.

And, the literature on day labor work has provided key demographic information of how day labor employment remains a contingent form of work in the informal labor industry. More recently, the literature on day labor illustrates issues of gender and masculinity, the challenges of seeking dignified labor conditions, and the creation of day labor centers. The chapter concludes with the theoretical frameworks used in examining the exploitation of day laborers in post-Katrina New Orleans. Situating the work of Latino day laborers within the historic and contemporary economic systems created through the exploitation of people of color—mainly immigrants—who were forced or coerced to migrate to the United States. One of the guiding frameworks is a Critical Race Theory (CRT) perspective, which emerged from legal studies in the 1980s. It is essentially critical of how the social construction of race is central in maintaining white supremacy and the oppression of people of color in the U.S. Moreover, a theory of Systemic racism explains how the subjugation of workers of color in the United States, from the forced migration of enslaved Africans, to the coerced migration of Chinese immigration at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the coerced migration of Mexican workers through the use of the Bracero Program in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Today, it frames our understanding of the impact of the economic and labor exploitation of day laborers in post-Katrina New Orleans.

In Chapter III I outline the methodological processes used to examine day labor work in New Orleans. During my tenure in New Orleans I sought to conduct sociological research that was connected to the community I was “studying.” I became an active volunteer at a community organization committed to organizing day laborers

across the city. This process allowed me to critically examine my position as a researcher, and conscious of what reciprocity may look like during the research process. The research experience also made me mindful of the connection between scholarship and activism.

The findings of this dissertation project are outlined in Chapters IV, V, and VI. Chapter IV examines the process of day laboring in post-Katrina New Orleans. The chapter discusses the creation of *las esquinas*—day labor corners—in the city, and how these are racialized spaces. That is, *las esquinas* are spaces identified as places where undocumented Latino workers may be hired. As a result, day laborers are often treated as disposable and cheap labor, and are subjected to ridicule and harassment in these areas. Indeed, day laborers often participate in emotional work while looking for work on day labor corners.

Chapter V illustrates what day laboring in post-Katrina New Orleans means for workers by examining their relationships with co-workers and employers. How do workers perceive their position relative to their co-workers—Latino, Black, and White—and to their Latino, Black, and White employers? How has “race” impacted day laborers’ employment situations in New Orleans? In Chapter VI I examine organizing efforts of day laborers in post-Katrina New Orleans. What motivates day laborers, as a disenfranchised community of workers, to organize as reconstruction workers in New Orleans? In particular, why do Latino immigrant day laborers identify as reconstruction workers in post-Katrina New Orleans, and what motivates them to participate in community organizing efforts? Chapter VII provides a brief summary of the

dissertation, as well as limitations of the research project, as well as policy implications.

The chapter concludes with a discussion of the future areas of research on day laboring in post-Katrina New Orleans.



## CHAPTER II

### RESEARCH SITE, LITERATURE REVIEW, AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

#### **New Orleans, Louisiana**

The primary research site for this dissertation project was New Orleans, Louisiana.

Typically not recognized as a new destination site, the city experienced major demographic shifts as evacuees fled out of New Orleans. New Orleanians lost their lives and livelihoods during and in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Likewise, the city experienced “a marked increase in Latino immigrants” as reconstruction of the city began to take place (Fussell 2009b:458). Today, New Orleans can arguably be added to discussions of the *Nuevo New South*. Indeed, the changing demographics of the Southern region of the United States over the last several decades has sparked interest in the changing social and political dynamics of communities that have experienced new influxes of Latino immigrants. The Deep South, along with the Midwest and parts of the West—became new destinations for immigrant populations—specifically Latina/os—beginning in the 1980s (Mohl 2003; Vásquez, Seales, and Marquardt 2008). New destinations are those cities, states, and regions that have not typically been recognized as immigrant gateways. Gateway locations have historically been identified as cities such as Los Angeles, New York, Houston, and Chicago and the Southwestern and Northeastern regions of the United States (Vásquez et al. 2008). New destinations began to be referenced as such as a result of the passage of the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) in 1986 (Massey, Durand, and Malone 2002; Vásquez et al. 2008).

Indeed, as Hirschman and Massey (2008:1) write, “almost 5 million immigrants came to the United States during the 1970s—the highest level of immigration, in both absolute and relative terms, since the early decades of the twentieth century.” This was as a result of the amendments made to the Immigration and Nationality Act. The amendments to the Immigration and Nationality Act, also commonly referred to as the Hart-Cellar Act, allowed for post-1965 immigration to the United States by people of Latin American and Asian origins (Hirschman and Massey 2008). Yet, immigration to the U.S. as a result of these amendments was only the “tip of the iceberg” (Hirschman and Massey 2008:1). Subsequent migration waves exceeded each other, with the decade of the 1980s surpassing the 1970s and the decade of the 1990s surpassing the 1980s (Hirschman and Massey 2008). The passage of IRCA provided “roughly 3 million undocumented Latino immigrants” with legalized status in the U.S. (Vásquez et al. 2008:26). This allowed them the mobility they needed in order to “search for better jobs and affordable housing throughout the country” (Vásquez et al. 2008:26), subsequently creating *new destinations* for immigrants. Still, while immigrants, particularly Latinos, began to migrate to new destinations such as North Carolina and Georgia, for instance, New Orleans did not experience such shifts.

This is not to say that New Orleans has not experienced migration. Quite the contrary, New Orleans has historically experienced numerous migration shifts. Remaining critical of an essentialist perspective when discussing New Orleans and its residents, it remains unquestionable that the city possesses a unique history. Founded in 1718, the port city was tied to the colonial powers of Spain and France until the

Louisiana Purchase shifted control of New Orleans to the United States in 1803 (Campanella 2007; Hirsch and Logsdon 1992). Sublette (2008) writes that each colonial power exercised different languages, customs, as well as different practices of slavery. Indeed, New Orleans and its residents have lived through various transitions over the centuries. Fussell (2007b) outlines a brief sketch of migration to the city designating three distinct periods of population shifts to New Orleans. The first from 1718-1899 began with the forced, or coerced, migration of laborers to the city. In 1719 1,000 European criminals, along with contract laborers, were brought to New Orleans in order to fortify the city's natural levees (Fussell 2007b). Their deaths, as a result of disease and starvation, resulted in the forced migration of enslaved Africans to New Orleans. As Fussell (2007b:848) points out "without the institution of slavery, New Orleans would not exist, since only force could keep these workers at their labor, while European contract farmers and workers arriving in the city moved on to more hospitable territory further inland." The racial and ethnic mosaic of New Orleans included Spanish and French colonists, enslaved Africans, and European migrants, particularly from Ireland and Italy.

In 1809 as a consequence of the Haitian Revolution New Orleans experienced a large influx of approximately 10,000 refugees from Saint-Domingue, present-day Haiti. This migration process doubled the population of the city. The Haitian Revolution also created fear in "the heart of the slave power" (Sublette 2008:204). The fear of a slave revolt in the U.S., or an overthrowing of power by enslaved Africans and African Americans from the hands of slave owners, led to U.S. policy changes (Sublette 2008).

On January 1, 1808, the Slave Trade Act of 1807 would go into practice prohibiting “all importation of slaves from abroad” (Sublette 2008:227). After 1808 the city was “no longer replenished by slave imports” and the hiring of cheap Irish labor took place (Fussell 2007b:848). Still, by 1810 the census noted that “37 percent of the approximately seventeen thousand residents [in New Orleans] were white; the rest were free people of color or slaves. No other U.S. city came close to that” (Sublette 2008:260). During these years, the migration of disposable labor brought into New Orleans continued. Fussell (2007b:848) points out:

the construction company that in 1838 dug the New Basin Canal with wheelbarrows and shovels to connect the Central Business District and Lake Pontchartrain and to expand trade routes in the Gulf South deemed slaves too valuable to expose to the risk of malaria, cholera, and yellow fever.

Consequently, approximately 6,000 Irish workers perished during this time. From 1830 to 1860, New Orleans experienced migration flows from Germany and Ireland. During this time the city experienced fast population growth—by 366 percent—and Irish immigrants began to outstrip enslaved blacks, becoming the majority working class of the city (Fussell 2007b).

However, as people became attracted to industry in the Northeast, and settlers began migrating to the West, New Orleans experienced declines in migration. Thus, whites in the port city of New Orleans, as Fussell (2007b:849-850) illustrates:

continued to rely on subordinated black sharecroppers and casual laborers.

Lynching and intimidation, plus the lack of a free market for mobile wage labor,

effectively confined black laborers to agricultural occupations in the Deep South from emancipation through the beginning of the twentieth century.

Indeed, white racism and racist practices supported white on black oppression throughout the history of New Orleans, permitting the continued subjugation of people of color in the area.

A slower period of migration and growth took place in New Orleans during the 20<sup>th</sup> century (1900-2005). During distinct periods throughout the 1900s New Orleans experienced migration from Latino populations, including Cubans, Hondurans, Mexicans, and Nicaraguans. However, these groups did not challenge the largely biracial dynamics of the city (Fussell 2007b). During the late 1970s Vietnamese migrants began moving to the city. All the while during these times Black New Orleanians were “still struggling to gain their civil rights” (Fussell 2007b:851). The third period marking New Orleans population history is marked by Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath. From 2005 to the present New Orleans has experienced changes to its demographics as a result of the displacement of New Orleanians, selective return migration after the storm, and an influx of Latino migrants, largely composed of undocumented migrants.

The residents of the Gulf Coast region of the United States experienced a devastating loss of life and property as Hurricane Katrina hit the coastal states of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. A national spotlight was shed on this area, particularly on New Orleans, Louisiana during this time. New Orleans has historically been known for its rich cultural heritage and its historic ties to the plantation south.

Indeed, U.S. racist society impacted the outcome and experiences of evacuees from New Orleans with residents of the city trapped and left behind during the floods—the majority of which were poor and black. And, while during the aftermath thousands of workers, many of whom were black, evacuated the city losing their jobs and as a result their livelihoods, the reconstruction of the city attracted a large contingent workforce—a large part of that being Latino workers (Browne-Dianis et al. 2006; Fussell 2007a). With 80% of the city’s buildings affected by flooding a contingent labor force was needed for the clean-up and rebuilding efforts (Fussell 2007a), providing for a “rapid response labor force” of Latinos to come to New Orleans (Fussell 2009a:458).

Certainly, the need for workers was witnessed in an executive order passed by the federal government on September 8, 2005 facilitating the low-wage hiring by federal contractors and subcontractors of undocumented workers by suspending the Davis-Bacon Act during a 90-day period following Katrina (see Chapter I). This cut the already low wages for workers in the states of Louisiana and Mississippi (Browne-Dianis et al. 2006). Moreover, the federal government did not sanction contractors for hiring undocumented workers. Arguably, these actions are linked to the already historic exploitation of workers of color in the U.S. Undoubtedly, the experiences of immigrant day laborers to New Orleans, while not a major population of workers to the area (Fussell 2007a), provides us with a critical perspective of the current exploitative work situations workers find themselves in. Consequently, migrants to the New Orleans in the form of disposable labor have been constructing and reconstructing New Orleans, both physically and socially, for centuries. While it is important to be critical of an

essentialist perspective when addressing New Orleans, there is no doubt that the history of the city is something that day laborers in post-Katrina New Orleans are affected by today.

This section provided a brief historical summary of the migration processes to New Orleans beginning with the city's establishment in 1718. Migration to the city has gone through ebbs and flows, but monumentally has been shaped by exploitative labor migration practices. These are the realities undergirding the lives of day laborers in post-Katrina New Orleans. In the following section I provide an examination of the literature on immigrant work, racialization, and day labor work. These three literatures marry well, and provide an overview of how immigration is imbued by "race" in the U.S.

### **Immigrant Work**

The U.S. has historically been a site of labor migration, whether forced, coerced or voluntary. The migration process has been an essential part of the U.S. economy from the very beginnings of the creation of the United States as a nation. The breadth of literature surrounding immigration, immigrants and labor is substantive. Much work has addressed the contributions that immigrants make to the economy. The literature surrounding ethnic economies and ethnic enclave economies, for instance, explores the importance of the concentration of homogenously racial and ethnic spaces (Bailey and Waldinger 1991; Light, Sabagh, Bozorgmehr, and Der-Martirosian 1994). Further social science exploring the participation of Latina/o workers in brown-collar occupations finds that Latina/o immigrants remain marginalized in the labor force where they earn low

wages (Catanzarite 2002). Further research recognizing the significance of gendered and racialized occupations focuses on Latina and Chicana domestic workers in the U.S. (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; Romero 2002). For instance, Romero points to the significance of the racialization of domestic work by noting that Latina and black women have disproportionately represented this particular occupational labor force. Social characteristics such as class status, nativity, or ethnicity, have racialized the employment process. These markers have insured the placement of racial and ethnic minorities at the lower rungs of the U.S. racial hierarchy that privileges whiteness.

Moreover, Hondagneu-Sotelo's (2001:13) *Doméstica: Immigrant Workers Cleaning and Caring in the Shadows of Affluence* provides a critical analysis of the racialization of paid domestic work, exemplifying the way in which:

Relationships between domestic employees and employers have always been imbued with racial meanings: white 'masters and mistresses' have been cast as pure and superior, and 'maids and servants,' drawn from specific racial-ethnic groups (varying by region), have been cast as dirty and socially inferior.

These relationships have continued to mark the experiences of workers of color as immigrants to the U.S.—specifically for Latina/os—who also face the “extra burdens and risks” of working without papers (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001:13). Domestic workers of color experience the “criminalization of employment, denial of social entitlements, and status as outlaws anywhere in the nation” (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001:13). Indeed, immigration status has continuously supported the exploitation of immigrant workers in the U.S. For immigrant workers, their status as “foreigners” and “immigrants” is



imbued by race (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001:13). Yet, the dominant ideology of a colorblind U.S. society is used by employers and the public in order to establish immigrant workers as “outsiders,” thereby disregarding the importance of race and the racialization of occupations dominated by immigrant labor (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001).

More recently, Parreñas (2001) has found that migrant Filipina domestic workers in both Rome and Los Angeles believe that their employers distinguish them racially from other domestic workers. Parreñas (2001:174) notes that Filipina domestic workers racially differentiate themselves from their Latina and Black peers in the domestic labor sector by “claiming and embracing their racial differentiation.” In this case, Filipina women negotiate their decline in social status (e.g., employment in the domestic sector) by noting their racial differentiation and linking this social characteristic to their educational attainment. Thus, migrant Filipinas claim that employers prefer them to other domestic workers of color. Parreñas (2001) notes that this process assists Filipina domestic workers in easing the pain of underemployment they find themselves in. As a result, in order to examine these racialized experiences it is important to address how racialization is “done and by whom” (Banton 2005:62).

### **Racialization**

Though the term racialization is widely used it remains highly contested among scholars and researchers because of its many meanings and uses (Murji and Solomos 2005). Certainly, the concept of racialization is commonly implemented and its numerous meanings allow for critical discussions in racial and ethnic studies. Murji and Solomos (2005:3) note:

we have found the idea of racialization useful for describing the processes by which racial meanings are attached to particular issues—often treated as social problems—and with the manner in which race appears to be a, or often the, key factor in ways they are defined and understood.

This would certainly be the case for the heightened tensions and policing of black youth in Britain during the 1970s (Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, and Roberts 1978). Fears and anxieties associated with muggings were tied to a racially identified population—the black community—creating a “black panic” as well as an anti-immigrant (e.g., West Asian) fear (Hall et al. 1978). In this case, a racialized population was systemically associated with what was perceived by British society and publicized in the media as a growing social ill (e.g., muggings). Muggings, in this case, became a symbol of black crime.

As such, racialization remains a dynamic process whereby the meanings tied to “race” are found to be continuously changing—produced and reproduced—and tied to social issues that are associated with historical points in time (De Genova 2005). De Genova, for example, addresses the contemporary experiences of Mexican migrants living and working in Chicago. His ethnographic work offers, for one, a critical examination of the way that Mexican migrants reconfigure what it means to be “Mexican” in a society that has an established black/white polarity (De Genova 2005:2). De Genova (2005) notes that Mexican migrants racially juxtapose their experiences

along a black/white continuum. As such, they place and understand their exploitative circumstances as migrant laborers in the U.S. along this paradigm.

The process of racialization plays a significant role in producing and reproducing a racial hierarchy. For example, by using social identifiers (e.g., class, ethnicity, or nationality) and connecting them to socially constructed racial categories we are able to maintain a working racial hierarchy. Racial categories are established, maintained, and connected to groups of people in a society. These racial identifiers facilitate the differentiation of groups of people, thus allowing for the continuation of existing dominant-subordinate relationships in a given society. Saenz, Filoteo, and Murga (2008) point out that racial and ethnic minorities in the U.S. have been historically identified as the *Other*. Racial and ethnic minorities in the U.S. have been considered threats to American cultural values and the U.S. national identity. More recently, Latina/os, in particular those of Mexican-origin, have been thought of as a threat to American traditions and ideals because of their perceived failure to assimilate to the white dominant social structure of the U.S. (Saenz et al. 2008). These racialized statuses place racial and ethnic minorities in institutionally (e.g., social, political, economic) subordinate positions in U.S. society.

In the case of day labor participation in New Orleans—where local Lowe’s and Home Depot’s parking lots are work pick-up sites for Latino, black, and a small portion of white workers—Latinos have experienced a significant amount of xenophobia. Latino laborers are routinely harassed, arrested, and stories of abuse and intimidation by

both employers and police officers are common (Downes 2007). Latino workers clearly experience and live through racialized situations:

Latino laborers are routinely being arrested. In Kenner [Louisiana], a suburb by the airport, where people shout “Go back to Mexico!” from passing pickup trucks, the police rounded up more than 30 laborers in January for congregating outside Home Depot. The men paid \$240 fines and now meet across the street (Downes 2007:20).

These types of encounters explain the dynamic racial experiences that Latino workers face in New Orleans. Indeed, situations such as these should surely be examined within a context of white supremacy. By exclusively identifying Latino day laborers and using phrases, such as, “go back to Mexico” we can see that Latino workers endure racialized situations that show historical continuity between the presence of Latinos and their structured placement within a U.S. racial hierarchy.

### **Day Labor**

My dissertation examines the participation of day laborers in the U.S. labor market. Day laborers are one of the most visible groups of migrant workers in the U.S. Day labor, as an employment sector of the U.S. labor market, has not been well captured in the literature, although it remains a “standard component of nonstandard employment,” and even though the participation of day laborers in the U.S. labor force has grown rapidly over the last thirty years (Valenzuela 2003:307). Scholars note that day labor participation in the U.S. labor market has become a pertinent component of the U.S. economy “...a significant segment of nonstandard and specifically contingent

employment, and an important employer of immigrant and other marginal workers in large and mid-sized cities” (Valenzuela 2003:307). However, day labor is not solely a U.S. phenomenon with day labor activity seen in Japan (Fowler 1996), regions of Mexico (Vanackere 1988), and in South America (Townsend 1997).

Two types of day labor industries have been classified in the U.S., informal and formal day labor work (Valenzuela 2003). The informal industry is mostly comprised of male labor, although there are a few cases of women participating in this sector, such as the case in New York (Valenzuela and Meléndez 2003). For the most part, these workers gather in open-air markets, such as curbsides or empty parking lots. The sites are designated public spaces in which day laborers may solicit temporary daily work (Valenzuela 2003). Day laborers in this informal labor industry are mainly foreign-born men who have recently arrived in the United States. Many of these workers are undocumented and have low levels of education and a poor command of English, characteristics that make them vulnerable to labor exploitation (Valenzuela 2003). Workers in this particular sector of the day labor industry are visible and as a result communities around the nation have recently passed ordinances banning day labor solicitation (Kornzweig 2000).

The second type of day labor industry is categorized as a formal industry. Workers in this particular industry are connected to for-profit temporary agencies or what are known as “hiring halls” where they are assigned employment at or around minimum wage salaries (Valenzuela 2003). In order to receive a work assignment, these laborers report to “hiring halls” where they are paid for their work on a daily basis. The

workers in this labor industry are found to be more diverse. For instance, workers in this industry also include nonimmigrant populations, such as women and the homeless (Roberts and Bartley 2004; Valenzuela 2003). Like participants in the informal sector, the majority of laborers in this industry are also made up of recently arrived undocumented immigrants who have low levels of education and a poor command of the English language (Valenzuela 2003).

Disputes over the establishment of “hiring halls” or work centers in cities throughout the nation are common. Some city councils have moved towards regulating the day labor sector by proposing city-funded work sites, which they argue would provide better opportunities (e.g., safer working conditions, higher wages) for undocumented workers. Supporters of such proposals argue that the establishment of “hiring halls” would assist day laborers accustomed to finding work in the informal sector (e.g., along roads and street corners) by providing more regulated employment (e.g., securing payments for work completed and regulating safer working conditions). However, residents of some areas where hiring halls have been proposed have opposed such actions:

We will fight like tigers against putting an illegal alien work center here,” said Larry Lee, who has lived in his Binglewood subdivision home since 1964. “I don’t want my tax money to help illegal workers (Hegstrom 2002:33).

Xenophobic response to the establishment of work centers is commonly prompted by “illegal” immigration. Residents in many cities are unable, or not inclined, to connect

immigrant workers of color, which they identify as “illegal aliens,” to the benefits incurred by the labor market. Indeed, although undocumented workers contribute to local economies, residents and government officials in some cities have vehemently challenged the establishment of hiring halls.

In February 2004 the Borough of Freehold, New Jersey, for instance, faced a federal civil rights lawsuit forbidding the harassment of day laborers seeking employment in the borough. This action came as a result of the establishment of loitering ordinances and the practice of issuing tickets at “officer’s discretion” targeting day laborers. In response, temporary hiring halls were set up in the community—for example, in local church halls. Nonetheless, as the following passage shows, the harassment of contractors by anti-immigrant groups continued:

They stand every day outside the church hall taking pictures and threatening employers with reporting them... They want to force the workers to stand at street corners again, and deepen the crisis (Ruiz 2004:3).

While the formal day labor industry is smaller than the informal one, both segments of the industry are unstable. Employees, regardless of the segment of the industry, do not receive benefits or protection (Valenzuela 2003). Day laborers in both segments are vulnerable to workplace abuses, face issues of nonpayment, work under hazardous conditions, and lack regular breaks during their workdays (Valenzuela 2003). For instance, qualitative studies employing a participant observation methodology coupled with semi-structured in-depth interviews have more recently examined the work

injury situations faced by day laborers in California (Walter, Bourgois, Loinaz, and Schillinger 2002).

In addition, Valenzuela (2001) has extended the focus of day labor participation by engaging the literature on entrepreneurship, or self-employment, and applying it to the work experiences of day laborers in the U.S. labor market. Certainly, immigrant entrepreneurship has been seen as a way of “making it” in America (Bonacich 1987:446). Yet, Valenzuela (2001) notes that day laborers undertake self-employment because they find themselves at a disadvantage in the labor market. More specifically, Valenzuela (2001:339) categorizes day laborers as survivalist entrepreneurs, noting that previous authors have stated that survivalist entrepreneurs find they are able to “...earn higher returns on their human capital in self-employment than in wage and salary employment or because they have no other employment options.” Valenzuela considers day laborers to fit into this particular category of entrepreneurship. These workers are able to use their sources of human capital in order to garner better wages than they would earn in other sectors of the job market. For example, day laborers, if undocumented, often find it difficult to find employment in what may be considered legitimate segments of the labor market, and as a result find that entrepreneurship provides them with job opportunities.

Although Valenzuela’s categorization of day laborers as survivalist entrepreneurs provides workers a certain amount of autonomy, or agency, within the labor market, this interpretation of day labor participation fails to examine the structural labor economy of the United States. While the treatment of day laborers as survivalist entrepreneurs



recognizes the disadvantaged situation of vulnerable workers, it fails to engage the structural components affecting their work experiences. While day laborers are active participants in the decisions they make regarding their work experiences, and view their entrepreneurship standing as a form of agency, it is useful to acknowledge that their work remains embedded in a structure that utilizes their labor in order to profit the U.S. economy. This employment situation can certainly be said of any work position in the labor market. However, day laborers—as migrant workers of color—are a part of a particularly vulnerable segment of the labor population. They endure harassment, deplorable working conditions, and are subjected to low/unpaid wages; as a result, it is important to tie these particular situations to the structure they are working in. Ultimately, it is important to examine day laborers' participation in the labor market (e.g., types of work and working conditions) by connecting their work to exploitative situations that benefit the U.S. economy.

More recently, research surrounding day labor participation has been conducted by Carolyn Turnovsky (2004). Her ethnographic research with day laborers in New York examines the way that day laborers negotiate their participation in the labor market. Her examination explores the social construction of identities, among Latino, Eastern European immigrant, and U.S. citizen (e.g., African American workers) day laborers. Turnovsky's research explores the significance of race, nationality, and skin color and how these identifying factors reflect the loss, or gain, of social status for day laborers. For instance, she notes that black Latinos at her field site were regarded as less

desirable workers because they were identified as African Americans, which in her field site were the least desirable workers (Turnovsky 2004).

Moreover, in the past decade research on day labor work has begun to slowly increase. For instance, researchers are examining the occupational health outcomes of day labor participation (Buchanan 2004; Walter et al. 2002; Walter, Bourgois, and Loinaz 2004), day labor organizing efforts (Camou 2009a, 2009b), and the performance of gender and masculinity in day laboring (Mirande, Pitones, and Diaz 2010; Purser 2009; Walter et al. 2004).

The sections above have provided a brief examination of the literature on immigrant work, the process of racialization, and day labor work. These three literatures provide insight into how immigrant work has been a central function of the U.S. economy, especially as a source of informal labor. The literature on the process of racialization has analyzed how social characteristics take on racial meanings and how immigrants often negotiate those meanings through a white-black paradigm. Moreover, the research on day labor work has begun to make a dent in the academic literature. Yet, a more critical understanding of how race and immigration imbue day labor work is still lacking. This dissertation fills in this gap in the academic literature.

In the following section I outline the theoretical frameworks guiding my analysis of day labor work in post-Katrina New Orleans. I provide an introduction to critical race theory, which emerged out of legal studies and has now been adopted by scholars in the realms of education and the social sciences. Moreover, the theory of systemic racism centers my argument of the exploitation of day labor work in post-Katrina New Orleans.

This theory analyzes how the social construction of race was historically created and is still used today to sustain and reproduce white racism in the U.S. in order to subordinate and maintain social inequalities that systemically disenfranchise people of color.

### **Critical Race Theory**

As I mentioned in the introductory chapter Critical Race Theory (CRT) originated from the field of contemporary legal studies. A CRT perspective was developed by progressive legal scholars in efforts to challenge the established institution of the law “confront[ing] critically the most explosive issues in American civilization: the historical centrality and complicity of law in upholding white supremacy” (West 1995:xi). Essentially, this school of thought sought to address the centrality of white supremacy in maintaining racial hierarchies that continuously sustain the subordination of peoples of color (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, and Thomas 1995). As a result, a critical race perspective confronts systems of domination, in particular those that uphold white supremacy as well as other foundational normative systems of subordination including, for instance, gender, sexuality, nationality, and class (Crenshaw et al. 1995).

The major tenets guiding a critical race framework connect the centrality of racism in U.S. society by tying it to white supremacy as well as directing progressive interests towards a focus on social change (Crenshaw et al. 1995). Specifically, critical race scholarship examines the fundamental aspect of racism in U.S. society. The perspective connects racist social systems shaping the everyday experiences of people of color as well as those of white people. In essence, this perspective examines how racist social structures privilege, both materially and psychologically, whiteness, and as a

result whites, whether they are of elite, working class, or poor social standing (Foley 1997; Harris 1995; Roediger 1991). For that reason, critical race scholars argue that there is little done in order to eradicate racism (Crenshaw et al. 1995; Delgado and Stefancic 2001). Additionally, a CRT perspective addresses the fundamental outcomes of socially and historically constructed racial categories (Haney López 1996). These racial categories are connected to race and racism and the advancement of material reality, or what we may relate to as material wealth (Crenshaw et al. 1995; Delgado and Stefancic 2001).

These tenets provide a guiding source of progressive knowledge directing this dissertation project. Critical race scholarship influences our decisions to confront racialized systems of domination as well as demanding a commitment towards social change (Crenshaw et al. 1995). This perspective anchors a framework that analyzes the connections between racialized power, racially ordered systems, and the underlying subordination of peoples of color in the United States (Crenshaw et al. 1995). Certainly, an underlying assumption of a critical race perspective shifts the dominant white gaze that has historically been placed on people of color towards white institutions and actors that have perpetuated racism in U.S. society. Clearly a bottom-up approach towards a sociological examination of systemic racism scrutinizes traditional examinations of the experiences of people of color in the U.S. Indeed, a critical race perspective offers an “oppositional voice” that engages social transformation (Calmore 1995; Delgado 1989). This, as Calmore (1995:317) points out, means that:

our efforts must, while directed by critical theory, extend beyond critique and theory to lend support to the struggle to relieve the extraordinary suffering and racist oppression that is commonplace in the life experiences of too many people of color.

These tenets have extended traditional academic examinations of racism in U.S. society. Certainly, a critical race perspective has influenced other areas of studies, such as sociology. Sociological analyses of structural racism have developed our examination of how the systemic exploitation of peoples of color in the U.S. have reinforced and reproduced racial hierarchies (Feagin 2001). A structural theory of racism fundamentally argues that racism is not solely an ideological phenomenon, but that racist systems exist at economic, political, and social levels of society essentially affecting life chances (Bonilla-Silva 1997; Feagin 2001, 2006). As a result, applying a critical race perspective as an underlying framework to this research project allows for a focus to be placed on a racially ordered U.S. labor market. In particular, shifting our concentration towards an examination of the historic and contemporary participation of immigrants of color in the labor market and scrutinizing that participation as a racialized experience that benefits a white power structure allows for a critical examination of the exploitation of the work of peoples of color in the U.S. Consequently, this dissertation explores how day laborers in post-Katrina New Orleans experience “race.”

## **Systemic Racism**

In order to frame an argument centered on examining the exploitation of racialized labor, I utilize an established theory of systemic racism in order to take a critical race view of the labor participation of people of color. Feagin (2006:17-18) notes that:

From the bloody first decades of European invasion in North America to the present day, this economic domination has involved the channeling and subordinating of the labor of non-European peoples, usually to maximize the material benefits to European Americans. For centuries now, this domination has encompassed severe and large-scale economic subordination or discrimination in such areas as slave labor, segregated jobs, discriminatory wages, exclusion from other socioeconomic opportunities reserved for whites, and, periodically, marginalization in the economy.

This systematic exploitation of peoples of color has reinforced and reproduced a racial hierarchy within U.S. social systems and institutions, such as, the labor market. The U.S. racial hierarchy has systematically placed whites and peoples of color along a racial continuum. The power dynamics found within this situation are clearly noted in a socio-historical context examining the forced migration of enslaved African peoples to the U.S. for the purposes of labor, which benefited the white male elite, and subsequently resulted in the establishment of the institution of slavery. The creation of this institution witnessed the enslavement of Africans and African Americans that were sold as a source of chattel labor.

Moreover, the recruitment of immigrants of color to the U.S. continued in the 1850s when Chinese men began to be imported to the U.S. Chinese migrants to the U.S. found themselves “Africanized” and “...seen as a subservient class of workers with few civil rights” (Feagin 2001:213). The late 1800s and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the migration of Mexicans to the U.S. In *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture*, Foley (1997) chronicles the history of the cotton industry in central Texas and the relationships between poor Whites, Blacks, and Mexicans. Undoubtedly, the cotton south reified white supremacy as triracial experiences were impacted by class, racial formation, and identification with and exclusion from whiteness (Foley 1997). The conflict between tenant farmers, sharecroppers, landowners, as well as, local, state, and federal agencies was situated in a context of white supremacy. For instance, Foley writes that poor whites, such as those from Oklahoma and Arkansas who were identified as Okies and Arkies, respectively, experienced a loss of whiteness as a result of their class standing (Foley 1997). Mexicans and Blacks were continuously excluded from social and economic equality. Foley argues that in Texas “where racial lines more clearly paralleled class lines and manly whiteness was inextricably tied to farm ownership, white tenants never fully embraced agricultural workers, mostly Mexicans and blacks, as class allies” (Foley 1997:194).

More notably, labor hierarchies began to be more strictly stratified along class and racial lines as the cotton industry began to change, with the mechanization of the

industry, credit financing, and the increasing value of land (Foley 1997). More interestingly, Foley (1997:204) notes:

the white belt of central Texas became noticeably brown between 1900 and 1940, leaving many poor whites to recall with nostalgia the pristine whiteness of Texas before the Mexicans came, when the whitest people could be found on the blackest land.

Interestingly enough, Mexicans, who were already regarded as nonwhite and a source of cheap labor, were recruited as workers to the U.S. in the 1920s, but by 1929 approximately 250,000 Mexican and Mexican Americans were repatriated during a ten-year (1929-1939) period (Foley 1997). However, as the need for workers increased during the 1940s Mexicans were once again contracted as *braceros*, or guest workers, to work in the U.S.

Indeed, Latinos, particularly those of Mexican-origin, have served as a prominent source of labor in the U.S. The recruitment and migration of Mexican male labor to the U.S. for the purpose of filling the gap in low-wage agricultural and manufacturing jobs resulted in the establishment of the Bracero Program, a wartime initiative that took place from 1942 to 1964 (Foley 1997; Rodriguez 2004). Rodriguez (2004:468) further argues that the U.S. government has, directly and indirectly, supported these actions consequently playing a “major role in the growth of immigrant labor in the U.S. economy.” Feagin (2001:218) also writes that “by bringing in large numbers of Mexican workers, U.S. employers have gradually changed the racial and ethnic landscape of the United States.” Consequently, by examining the current labor



experiences of day laborers in the U.S. we are able to further study the work experiences of immigrants of color. In using a theory of systemic racism we are clearly able to expand the current literature and scholarship focusing on the day labor industry and the experiences of workers of color in the labor market. In doing so, we are broadening our knowledge of the racialized work experiences of day laborers and subsequently examining the exploitation of their labor for the gains of a U.S. economy.

Moreover, there is a need to problematize the way in which immigrant status is not simply a social characteristic that is tacked on, or added, to peoples identity, but is imbued with racial meaning (Gordon and Lenhardt 2007). That is, immigrant, as Hondagneu-Sotelo (2001) points out has historically and contemporarily been characterized as “foreign,” seen and treated as the *Other* that is disposable. The immigrant is characterized and treated as the “illegal alien,” and differentiated as such in order to subjugate and exploit for economic gains. Over and over again we have witnessed the *othering* of immigrants, this so that their rights as disenfranchised people in the U.S. are not questioned. This is clearly the undergirding practice of how the social construction of whiteness and white supremacy works. It provides whites—elite, working-class and poor—in the U.S. with the privilege to not question the use of immigrants as a labor force when it suits their social, psychological, and economic interests. Immigrant status—and in particular undocumented immigrant status—functions as a way of diminishing immigrants’ rights in the U.S. (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001).

Indeed, racializing undocumented immigrants, particularly day laborers, situates them at the bottom rungs of the racial hierarchy. In a racist nativist U.S. society they have little leverage in demanding workers' rights, because they are characterized as "illegal aliens." Consequently, employers are able to use them as source of cheap labor and dispose of them when they are no longer needed or when they begin to demand their rights as workers. There is no question that the dignity of working immigrants in the U.S. remains an issue of concern and demands more attention by scholars and social justice activists.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter began with a brief overview of New Orleans's migration history and the impact that the social construction of race has had on the city and its residents throughout the years. New Orleans was founded in 1718, with rule over the port city held by the colonial powers of Spain and France. Subsequent power over the city transferred to the U.S. in 1803 with the signing of the Louisiana Purchase. Over the years, these histories have impacted the city's racial, cultural, and social mosaic. Moreover, as history shows, New Orleans has been impacted by the need for disposable labor. Indeed, migration to the city—either forced, coerced, or voluntary—has taken place over the years. In particular, the need for exploitable labor in the city has been imbued with racial meaning, and continues to play a role in post-Katrina New Orleans. Today, Latino day laborers remain positioned within a racist structure based on the subordination of people of color in the U.S. And, in New Orleans, day laborers are

continuously identified as a racial *Other*—the “illegal aliens” that are the target of racist nativist discourse in the U.S.

As a result, I examine the issues impacting Latino day laborers within two theoretical frameworks: CRT and systemic racism. These frameworks allow for a critical understanding of racist structures of white supremacy. That is, the power relationships that privilege whiteness in our society and continuously disadvantage people of color. These theories provide us with a critical understanding of how racial *Others* are created and how social “ills” are racialized in order to support the disenfranchisement of immigrants in the U.S. For instance, as Delgado and Stefancic (2001:8) write, scholars are making note of the way in which racial and ethnic minorities have been racialized by the dominant society “at different times, in response to shifting needs in the labor market.” Indeed, the consumption of immigrant labor and the exploitation of immigrant workers remain a stark reality in the U.S. Post-Katrina New Orleans is no exception.

Today, more than ever, immigration and race should remain at the forefront of academic research. The two are not separate issues. Likewise, they should be examined within critical frameworks that challenge conventional thought and research. CRT scholarship provides us with a critical understanding of how “race” works in our society, and thus moves us toward social change and justice. Consequently, in the following chapter I outline the research methodology employed in this dissertation. I discuss my own privilege and position as a Latina sociologist and the importance of tying research

and activism together. The chapter concludes with the data collection process used in this dissertation.

### CHAPTER III

#### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

My last formal interview with a day laborer was with Don David. As we sat facing each other I began to explain the process of consenting to an interview. We finished talking and joking about how strange it is to listen to one's voice in an audio-recording and the like. Then I asked him if he had any questions before we began. Don David said to me very intently: "Lorena, I'm not educated. I never learned to read or write. I don't know what it is that you are looking for or what I can tell you. I've never done an interview." I simply responded, "Don David you are telling me about your life, it's an important story to tell. You know best what it is like to be on the corner, as a *jornalero* (day laborer), looking for work. You know what it's like to be harassed by police, to not find work, to miss your family back home. No one knows your story better than you. I have learned from you more than I could have ever learned in a classroom." This interaction made me realize a couple of things. I had spent a lot of time with Don David and others like him, day laborers on the corners of post-Katrina New Orleans, building rapport with the community of workers over the course of 23 months, yet there was still a sense, once we sat and turned on the recorder, that I was a researcher. On the corners we joked and had conversations about the day, "kicking back" a bit, if you will. Although I was clearly not "one of the boys" the workers were used to seeing me around and felt free to act like themselves around me, or at least I felt as though they did not completely censor themselves in their interactions with me. Over the course of my time in New Orleans I attended community protests and actions with workers, went to doctor's visits with them

and translated for them in these and other occasions, joined in on weekly organizing meetings, and many more things, but there was still something about my position that was different.

Therefore, although I repeatedly negotiated different positions and roles as I was in the field I was unable to control the way others—day laborers and organizers—saw and positioned my participation within the community (Harrison, MacGibbon, and Morton 2001). With these issues in mind, I begin this discussion by addressing issues of privilege and positionality in my work as a Latina sociologist, discussing issues of activism and reciprocity, and describing the data collection process for this dissertation research.

### **Privilege**

In *Building Community: Social Science in Action*, Nyden, Figert, Shibley, and Burrows (1997:3) quote Saul Alinsky, a well-known community organizer, as once saying “the word academic is synonymous for irrelevant.” I read these words as I was writing the methods chapter to this dissertation and began dissecting the meaning behind them. I was familiar with what they meant, and had scrutinized my role and position as a social scientist and activist scholar before my move to New Orleans. I realized that my training as a sociologist has afforded me a certain amount of privilege (Hermes 1998; Madison 2005). I am seen as a researcher, an academic, whose job it is to conduct empirical social science research. My training as a sociologist has centered, for the most part, around positivistic social science research, which meant that objectivity and neutrality are highly valued skills in my profession. As Burawoy (1998:10) notes,

“positive science calls for the distancing of observer from the object of study, a disposition of detachment.” Furthermore, my position within the *hierarchy of credibility* would not only be questioned by my research participants, but also by my academic peers (Becker 1967). I did not want these issues to be obstacles that would disconnect and detach me from my informants in the field (see Harrison et al. 2001). With this in mind, I focused on a reflexive model of science which proposes “engagement as the road to knowledge” (Burawoy 1998:5). My focus and intent was to build reciprocity—“a give and take of social interactions” (Harrison et al. 2001) and to center day laborers as my figures of authority within the community (Pizarro 1998). In doing this I had to acknowledge that as a graduate student I was in a position of privilege if only within myself. I was educated and bilingual, those two things in and of themselves, were highly coveted among the community I was working with because they meant that I could negotiate and advocate on behalf of workers in spaces where they would otherwise not be respected or ignored due to their lack of English proficiency.

My initial research was going to take place over the course of four months in fall 2008. I would be volunteering with a local organization involved in organizing the day labor community in post-Katrina New Orleans. This meant a couple of things. I would gain entry into the day labor community, conduct interviews with workers, and leave New Orleans by winter 2008. This basically meant that I would go to New Orleans, volunteer, gather data through a series of in-depth interviews, and ultimately leave with the information necessary for a dissertation and subsequent Ph.D., problematic issues not unfamiliar to the academic community (see Baca Zinn 1979; see Blauner and Wellman

2001). That is academic privilege, and ultimately how Alinsky's words ran truest to me in terms of irrelevance. In situating my privileged position as an academic I also wanted to have my work with the community, in whatever way I could, not be irrelevant. I was constantly questioning whether my position within the day labor community was useful to the workers themselves. In acknowledging my privileged position as a bilingual Latina researcher I began to focus on the qualities I had that allowed me to gain access and build trust with an understudied population—day laborers.

### **Positionality**

I began to question the social characteristics and histories that set me apart from the day laborers I would be working with before I arrived in New Orleans. Positionality, that is, the “standpoint judgement of the researcher” and relation to participants in the field (Parker and Lynn 2002) would no doubt affect me and participants in distinct ways. I participated in a Race and Ethnic Workshop sponsored by the Department of Sociology and the Race and Ethnic Studies Institute at Texas A&M University in spring 2008, a few months before my move to New Orleans to conduct dissertation research. During this time professors and graduate students critiqued my dissertation proposal providing helpful insight on how to expand my research. Comments included the use of theory and my methods of research as well as thoughts on other literature that I may have wanted to consider which could guide and influence my work. Interestingly, one of the questions brought up during this process was from a colleague, a young male graduate student. He prefaced his question by saying that I was an attractive young woman, a comment that I honestly found annoying and which caught me off-guard. His question



was whether I had thought about my interactions with the male informants I was going to be working with during my time in New Orleans. He expressed concern, asking whether I was fearful of my safety when interviewing “illegal” male immigrants. I was taken aback by this query. The question, in my mind, brought up a few issues.

First, I believe that the question brought up by my fellow male graduate student colleague reflected a note of paternalism. I am sure that my research with male day laborers would not have been questioned if I were a male researcher. As a young Mexican immigrant with a visible physical handicap I am continuously aware of who I am and how I present myself to others. For instance, I constantly negotiate the comments and stares I receive on a daily basis as a consequence of my physical appearance. I did not, for a moment, believe that I would be immune to any of these attributes when I began my research with day laborers in New Orleans. Quite the contrary, I thought about every aspect of entering a gendered space and played out possible scenarios in my mind. These, of course, would not address the litany of issues that I faced once I was in the field. For as Wax (1979) notes some of our most personal characteristics become the most salient once we are in the field.

Indeed, part of my willingness and enthusiasm for conducting research in New Orleans came from an interaction with day laborers at an Immigrant and Refugee Rights conference held in January 2008 in Houston, Texas (see Chapter I). I attended a session facilitated by a group of post-Katrina day laborers and spoke to them about my research. They encouraged me to visit them in New Orleans and interview them in order to gather their stories and experiences regarding the reconstruction of the city. However, I knew

that I would still have to negotiate gendered space, that is, I was aware that I would be spending the majority of my time talking to day laborers in the spaces that they dominated, areas where they find work—day labor corners. These are open air-spaces near home improvement stores and curb-sides. I had partly tried to prepare myself for this negotiation of space by conducting pilot research with day laborers in Texas during summer 2007. I was not sure if workers would welcome my entrance into day labor space. However, I found that the men I spoke with in Texas were welcoming and as a result felt as though, with time, I would be able to negotiate day labor space in New Orleans. Overall, I felt like I was as prepared as I could be to conduct research with Latino immigrant men in post-Katrina New Orleans.

Another issue that I took offense with was the way that the workers themselves were being characterized by my fellow graduate student. The inference was that these “illegal” immigrants were somehow going to take advantage of me in some way. Was I not afraid of what could happen to me? I took great offense to that comment, but did not know how to address it at the time. My honest response was that I was not afraid. And, one of my professors commented that I had to negotiate my interaction with white men all the time, how safe was that situation in the context of racist white space? My professor was referencing the daily negotiations that students of color have to make at Texas A&M University, a dominant white institution. And, by that matter, the negotiations that women of color have to make within racist, male-dominated U.S. social structures as a part of their everyday lives. Moreover, the undertone of the concerned query seemed to hypersexualize the Latino men I was going to be working with

throughout my stay in New Orleans, an issue that men of color have historically had to address.

I do have to say that, in retrospect, I do not believe that my fellow male graduate student was the only one to have these views concerning my research agenda with day laborers. I believe that he was the most candid and vocal about his view of my research. I do not doubt that others wanted to raise the same concerns yet, for some reason or another, refrained from commenting on my choice for dissertation research. During my pilot research two of my fellow female graduate colleagues had commented on how they were proud of the fact that I was taking on a research agenda with day laborers. They knew that gaining access to undocumented immigrants during a time when there was a rise in anti-immigrant sentiment would be difficult. They also believed that accessing male dominated day labor space would take time, and encouraged my research interests.

Over time I negotiated my position as an *insider* (Baca Zinn 1979) within the community. For instance, being a Mexican immigrant and fluent in Spanish facilitated my entrance within the community allowing for greater involvement with the workers than I had initially anticipated. I was not only able to communicate with workers in their own language, but was also familiar with some of the places they came from or passed through during their migration process. And, although I had anticipated my gender status to be an issue in terms of building rapport, I found that overall it allowed for workers to not see me as a threat. While I was half-jokingly asked a few times if I was “immigration”—a federal agent—I believe that my gender also allowed the men to see me as a sister, daughter, and friend.

Overall, I continuously had to negotiate my positionality during the research process. I knew that I would be challenged by my academic peers when it came to issues of conducting research, especially when it came to immersing myself within a male-dominated community, advocating for and closely working with day laborers. It also meant that over the course of my stay in New Orleans I would have to build and establish rapport with men in their male-dominated spaces as an outsider—a Latina researcher. These situations, while they may seem like obstacles, allowed for the establishment of trust between me and the community I was working with.

### **Activism and Reciprocity**

In the above sections I have addressed issues of privilege and positionality and I now move forward to discussing my role as a Ph.D. candidate in this research process. In 1979 Maxine Baca Zinn addressed that the viewpoint among scholars was that researchers of minority group status—insiders—were thought to be the “best qualified to conduct research in minority communities” acknowledging that this view is often contested because there are those who believe “minority scholars may lack the objectivity required” to complete this research (Baca Zinn 1979:210). Not only would those issues affect me in my current work, but I was also very adamant about participating in community organizing while I was conducting my research. There were times when I was questioned—whether out of concern for upholding academic standards of validity or pure curiosity—by academics about this situation.

Inevitably, my life experiences and academic status as a Ph.D. candidate have challenged the way in which I conduct research. How would I “give back,” if you will,

to the community that was providing me with the information that I would need in order to complete a dissertation and subsequently earn a Ph.D.? My initial plan to volunteer for four months with an organization that worked closely with day laborers began to change once I was in the field. As I walked into the New Orleans Workers' Center for Racial Justice (NOWCRJ) one late morning in July 2008 I was unsure what they needed of me, or what I could possibly do to "give back" to the day labor community. I was quickly challenged by community organizers as to this situation. I was informed that following the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina a number of researchers and journalists had come to the area in order to interview workers about their experiences in reconstructing New Orleans. What my mentor once referred to as "drive-by" or "drive-thru" research. However, the knowledge of where these interviews ended up was limited. Workers were unaware of who was actually benefitting from their interviews—socially or monetarily. The workers' daily experiences and realities were topics of great interest, especially following the devastating images of the Hurricane aftermath. Unfortunately, workers themselves, community organizers shared with me, felt as though their stories were taken from them (see Blauner and Wellman 2001). Little was being given back to workers in terms of reciprocity. It was not so much about a monetary exchange, but a form of mutual respect, I gathered, for how workers felt and how workers wanted their stories to be told and heard by others.

As a result, my gatekeepers, two young community organizers, were very clear that if I wanted to conduct research with day laborers, then the day laborers themselves would have to agree to this exchange. I would have to propose my research to members

of El Congreso de Jornaleros (The Congress of Day Laborers), a membership organization of day laborers, and they would ultimately have the final say in whether or not they would accept my participation as a researcher and volunteer within the day labor community. It was also clearly stated that I would be an asset to the organization and as a result the workers themselves because I had a car and spoke Spanish, two things that were highly coveted in the city. And, because I was willing to be a full-time volunteer providing my services for four consecutive months I would also be a valuable asset to the day labor community at-large. My immersion into the organization began to slowly take place and my research progressed to a 23-month research experience with the day labor community in New Orleans. It became an important part of my research experience, to be helpful and active among a community of people as well as gaining valuable knowledge about their experiences as day laborers in post-Katrina New Orleans. Even though, as Becker (1967:243) stated in his presidential address at the annual meeting of the Society for the Study of Social Problems, “the sociologist who favors officialdom will be spared the accusation of bias. And thus we see why we accuse ourselves of bias only when we take the side of the subordinate.” There is no denying that much like Pierette Hondagneu-Sotelo (1994) writes, in the acknowledgement of *Gendered Transitions*, that immersion within the community took place. Even amongst a time when I struggled with the fact that many, more traditional sociologists would question the objectivity and neutrality of my work, I honestly believed that as sociologists, if we are able to acknowledge our own bias and actions, then we are able to be true to the data that we present. Thus, it is our duty to gather the

data, analyze it, and report our findings. Indeed, when we deny and instead purport a value-free neutrality in our research—that is when we should begin to question our work as social scientist. There is no denying that my own personal history influences the work that I do and that my acknowledgement and want to create social change reflects my choice in research agendas. I also mentioned the issue of privilege. I write that I have privilege in being an academic. We, as social scientists, are able to go into communities, gain knowledge and then step away at one point or another and go on to writing about the communities we “study.” That is something that I knew would happen when I first thought about doing research in New Orleans. I would travel to a devastated area, gather information from those reconstructing the city and then leave. That is part of what I do as a sociologist, but that is also part of the privilege of being an academic. I could stay for as long as I needed to and then leave. However, the population that I was working with would not be able to do the same so easily. They, for the most part, were in New Orleans because they needed jobs in order to support themselves and their families. I also came to realize that for many, New Orleans is now home. Yet, there is a constant struggle to be defined by others as part of the city. The majority of the population I worked with was Latino and undocumented, thus they remain under constant surveillance. For instance, New Orleanians do not necessarily see them as a part of the city and New Orleans police racially profile them.

I kept all of these issues in mind as I conducted my research in New Orleans. I also keep them in mind as I write about and present research regarding my time in New Orleans. I remain conscious of the goals of employing a critical race perspective in my

work and find that Pizarro's (1998:65-66) usage of Chicana/o epistemology, which "demands that we not choose between academic integrity and seeking justice because it is grounded in the notion that the former is the latter" remain the basis for my work as a sociologist. Likewise, adopting a community-based and activist research stance, which devotes "time, attention, thought, and sometimes actions to areas that are defined as problematic by the community itself" (Hermes 1998:164) are critical and I strive to keep them at the forefront of my work.

### **Data Collection**

As I previously mentioned my initial research agenda was going to employ a qualitative research method approach in the form of in-depth interviews with day laborers in post-Katrina New Orleans over the course of four months. National surveys examining the participation of day laborers in the U.S. labor market have previously been conducted (Valenzuela and Meléndez 2003), and ethnographic analyses of day laborers in New York and California (Turnovsky 2004; Purser 2009) have also been completed. I initially proposed to employ a qualitative analysis using a series of in-depth interviews with day laborers in New Orleans, Louisiana because it would allow for the development and enrichment of the research process (Kvale 1996). In addition, it would afford respondents the opportunity to engage in a research inquiry that provided them with a venue for dialogue; this is often omitted from quantitative research methodology. Moreover, a critical qualitative approach would allow respondents and the researcher to engage in an "open and ongoing" process providing for the voices of participants whose stories "are otherwise restrained and out of reach" to be told (Madison 2005:5).



However, over the course of my introduction with the day labor community I began to realize that I would need to spend more time with day laborers in order to better understand the issues faced by these reconstruction workers, thus gaining “first hand involvement in the communities being studied (Baca Zinn 1979:209). As a result, my research took the form of ethnography. The data collection process for this research began in July 2008 and ran through June 2010. During these months I was an active volunteer with the Congreso de Jornaleros (Congreso), a project of the New Orleans Workers’ Center for Racial Justice. The Congreso is involved in organizing day laborers in and around the greater New Orleans area. Volunteering for the Congreso meant that I participated in daily morning outreaches with day labor organizers throughout *las esquinas* of New Orleans during the week. Outreaching consisted of several things: speaking with day laborers about worker and immigrant rights, issues of wage theft, answering questions about the organization, and scheduling rides to municipal and traffic court visits where I would also translate for them, if necessary. I also participated in labor actions, marches, and protests in the time I was there. My volunteering participation involved a lot of logistical situations; I would help with what was immediately needed. Different situations arose throughout the week and I would help out in whatever way I could. My days with day laborers also consisted of days when we just spoke about home—their native countries—families, stories about working in New Orleans and in other places, soccer games, and just everyday life events—sometimes just “shooting the breeze.”

In addition, I collected a total of 31 in-depth semi-structured interviews with day laborers. My interview participants were primarily from Mexico and Central America. The majority of the workers I interviewed were from Honduras and Mexico. Interviews were conducted in Spanish, audio-recorded, and ranged in length from one to two hours. Interviews were then transcribed and analyzed in Spanish and the portions of the responses cited in this research were subsequently translated into English.

I began collecting interviews with day laborers three months after I arrived in New Orleans, and the process continued throughout my stay. The collection of interviews was not a simple process. I initially planned to recruit participants through a snowball sampling method, or what may also be considered as asking for personal references from day laborers. I had planned to ask day laborers participating in interviews to provide me with information about other possible respondents. However, this process did not work as well as I had hoped. There were times when respondents were very honest in stating that they did not think that any of their friends would be interested in participating—either because they were intimidated by the interview process, did not have time for an interview, or just plain did not want to talk to me. I set up interviews with workers and was stood up a few times. As a result, many, but not all, of the interviews conducted for this project were completed with members of the Congreso. Membership in the Congreso fluctuates. And, for the most part, all day laborers are “members” if they look for work in *las esquinas* of New Orleans. Members do not necessarily have to attend meetings to be a part of the organization, yet there are workers who play a more active role in the organization—much of this depends on their

schedules. Interviews were conducted in several places depending on weather, time of day, and availability of interview space. I conducted interviews on day labor corners, in fast-food restaurants, and in different meeting spaces at the NOWCRJ.

The analysis of the interviews began after each interview took place. Throughout the interview process I took notes on the margins of a notebook as I followed the questions on the interview guide. After the interview was completed I would go back and highlight questions, review my notes, and reflect on my observations of the interview. I developed a coding system (Strauss and Corbin 1998) that allowed me to categorize research questions, responses, and field notes. The first couple of interviews provided me with some basic categories and allowed me to modify my questions, probing, and analysis of data as the research continued. There were days when I did not write field notes since I was too exhausted to record information, something that Baca Zinn (1979) addressed during her research process as well. There were times when my mornings began at 7:30 a.m. and my day ran through until 11:00 p.m. I was also more focused and able to systemically review the data I gathered once I was out of the field. During this time I was able to concentrate on examining recurring themes within the research I had collected, noting larger thematic topics and then sub-dividing those when appropriate into sub-themes.

The data collection process allowed me to reflect not only on the data I was collecting, but on the impact it had on me and my participants. I would have informal discussions with organizers and with members of the Congreso about where the data would eventually end up. Although we were all clear that I would be earning a Ph.D. as

a result of this data collection process, it remained, at times, unclear what the day laborers would gain from it. At this point and time, I, myself, as a social scientist, still question what the community is able to gain from my work, but I remain enthusiastic that the research will affect day laborers, especially in New Orleans, in a positive way. And, I constantly remind myself, and others, that this is not only my work—it is also that of those who impacted the writing of it.

### **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter I discussed some of the issues experienced by social scientists, in particular researchers of color, during the process of data collection. The research method process is challenging. Furthermore, understanding and taking responsibility for my position as a researcher provided me with the opportunity to grow as an academic. The process allowed me to connect with the people I was supposed to be “studying” and instead, provided me the opportunity to give back to the community. Indeed, we each have our own opportunity to give back to the communities we go in to and learn from—reciprocity is possible. In order to accomplish this we often times follow the lead of our participants. For example, one of the ways I was able to give back to the community was by being an active volunteer with a community organization committed to day labor organizing. Indeed, as researchers who participate *in* and *with* communities of color we must constantly assess our positions in the research method process and remain cognizant of the way we conduct research and what reciprocity can look like.

Moreover, many of us who seek to adopt a social justice framework are challenged to question normative ways of conducting social science research. Part of

accomplishing this is by understanding that the knowledge we gather is not our own. Indeed, the day laborers, I spoke with and learned from, were the authority on the experiences they live on *las esquinas* of New Orleans. The data we gather, then, remains part of the community. It is also clear that part of being an activist-scholar is realizing that the way we present our research is relevant once we leave the communities we worked with. This is something I am constantly negotiating as a social scientist. In the following chapter I outline day laboring as a process that is not only about looking for work in open-air spaces, but is also a racialized process that takes on emotional meaning for day laborers in post-Katrina New Orleans.

## CHAPTER IV

### DAY LABORING IN POST-KATRINA NEW ORLEANS

In the days following the devastating aftermath of Hurricane Katrina many began to wonder how people would begin to rebuild their lives, and the city of New Orleans. The systemically racist structures affecting Black New Orleanians were clear and ever-present. Critical examinations of “the ways in which humankind created the physical and social landscape the storm landed on and the way in which persons and institutions responded to that crisis” are still being addressed today (Erikson 2007:xx). Indeed, a national debate addressing these issues began to take shape, yet during this time the reconstruction of the city began to take place. Indeed, in the days, weeks, and months after the storm those wondering who would take on the arduous task of rebuilding New Orleans may have been unaware of how the task was being taken on by Latino immigrant workers to the city. Some of the first cleanup responders to the New Orleans and other Gulf Coast areas were Latino immigrants (Fussell 2009a). Hurricanes Katrina (August 2009) and Rita (September 2005) had impacted an area of 90,000 square miles (Erikson2007:xx) attracting Latino immigrant workers, along with U.S.-born workers, to the gulf areas (Browne-Dianis et al. 2006). In New Orleans there was an abundance of work. Don Nicolas points out:

The city was like a cemetery...and you couldn't walk a block without it being like a *subasta* (auction). We made a lot of money... “come on, come on” employers would tell us. My friend would say, “the man says he'll pay us 100 per person for demolition work.” And as we were returning home from one job

there would be another 5 employers asking us to work. We'd get home around 10 p.m. *El patron* (the boss) would say, "I'll come for you at 7 tomorrow." If there was another employer there he'd say, "How much is he paying you? I'll pay you 150." They needed workers. They were nice to us—even the National Guard—*te hechaban la mano* (they would give you a hand). Today, it's not like that.

Many workers speak of the first weeks and months after Katrina as a time when they did not have to look for work, the work or employer came looking for them. Workers did not have to worry about being harassed by employers, police, or National Guard during that time. As a matter of fact, day labor corners—*las esquinas*—did not exist. There was no need for the creation of day labor corners until reconstruction work in the city began to slow down. When that happened Latino workers began meeting at Lee Circle, located in the Central Business District (CBD). Rafael illustrates what it was like to look for work on Lee Circle and the subsequent disappearance of the corner:

...Lee Circle, we would stand there like 400 or 500 people looking for work. And we would all find work, right? It would take us longer to get to the corner then to find and go to work. But when the city was reconstructed, the most important parts of the city, that's when the community, the businesses, the hotels, they began to call the police and call immigration. That's when immigration began to conduct raids. They would arrest 50 to 100 people daily, so the corner slowly began to disappear, first because...they were deporting people, and then

because as a result of that one feared going there. That's when that corner disappeared.

Indeed, when the city began attracting tourists, those looking for work on Lee Circle became an uncomfortable blemish and an inconvenience, leading to raids on Lee Circle by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). As a result, day laborers created and began meeting on different *esquinas*—day labor corners—throughout the city. These corners were located close to convenience stores and home improvement centers. The corners I visited throughout my stay in New Orleans remain some of those original day labor corners, some of the same people who established the corners are still day laboring on them.

### **Las Esquinas**

The majority of day laborers I interacted with in New Orleans never expected to be standing on a corner looking for work. Reconstruction workers to the city learned about las esquinas and the process of *esquiñando*—looking for work on the corner—through those who immigrated before them. While on the corners workers often joked, calling the corners their “office” as these spaces are where workers spend the majority of their time looking for work. For instance, Enrique recalls learning about the corner through his sister who was working in a taco stand—*taquería*—near a day labor corner.

My sister told me, “no, employers come here looking for workers, you can work with anyone,” and that's how I began to work. That's how I arrived at the corner.



Still, the popular narrative in the workers' countries of origin is that there is an abundance of work in the United States; this idea often fueled by immigrant stories or media outlets. However, day laboring is not only about looking for work on a corner. Day laboring becomes an arduous and emotional process. As Rafael illustrates when I asked him to describe what it is like to look for work on a day labor corner:

Well basically what people do as day laborers, well...they get up every morning, at 5 or 4 in the morning. They prepare their food, go to the corner, and wait on the corner whether at a Lowe's, or a Home Depot, or a gas station, until contractors come, right? They look for work in painting, ceramics, sheetrock, but during that trajectory a day laborer doesn't know if he's looking for work, what will happen, right? If he is going to go to work with an employer. He doesn't know if the employer will pay him. He doesn't know if the police will arrive at the corner, if he will be arrested, or if immigration will arrive and if he will be deported. So there are many things. A day labor lives through a lot of situations on a daily basis while on the corner, right? It's not only about looking for work, there are also risks while at work with home owners, with local business owners, with police and with immigration.

The reality remains that Latino day laborers are not only "looking for work" while standing on the corner. They are calculating how many days they have to work in order to pay rent and buy food for the week or month, they wonder how much money they will be able to remit back to their families, and remain vigilant and cautious of employers and of law enforcement. As a result, day laboring remains a racialized

process since Latino immigrant workers are impacted by the social characteristics of race-ethnicity and authorized status, which play a vital role in the way they look for work. Likewise, these social characteristics are situated within a racial hierarchy that positions Latino day laborers at the bottom rungs of the labor market. Thus, their dependence on employment as day laborers is actually undergirded by the fact that they can be exploited because of their race-ethnicity and legal status. Latino day laborers remain embedded in a system that creates a feeling of insecurity and frustration when looking for work on day labor corners.

While we may ask ourselves why immigrants put themselves through these situations, the reality is that for many immigrants the wages they are able to earn in the United States are much higher than in their native homelands. This then remains a large motivating factor for migrating to the United States. As Fine (2006:180) notes:

poverty, global economic inequalities, and the development and trade policies that have exacerbated these problems have catalyzed enormous numbers of immigrants to seek higher-paying employment in the United States. Federal immigration policy and enforcement is creating a huge reserve labor pool of workers whose status as undocumented immigrants leads them to work for low wages, make few demands on employers regarding other conditions of work, and resist going to government agencies for help.

In New Orleans there is added pressure when standing on a corner looking for work as an immigrant. New Orleans day laborers are under constant surveillance by authorities and frequently experience harassment. For many, just standing on the corner

creates anxiety. There is looming intimidation and fear of deportation among day laborers in New Orleans. As illustrated by Adan's response to how he feels about looking for work on a day labor corner in New Orleans:

Well I feel a bit intimidated knowing that this country isn't ours and that they may deport us if they want to.

Likewise, Adrian's response to looking for work on the corner during a time when day laborers are no longer welcomed in the city, speaks of the added pressure and consequences of being a day laborer on the corners of New Orleans. Adrian recounts his experience of looking for work on the corner and experiences of harassment by the National Guard:

The army...they would arrive and run people off. Once as I was arriving at the corner, a *poli* (officer), I don't know his rank, but he had a lot of stripes here (he points to his arm). "You," he told me. I saw that people were running, and I asked myself "But why are they running?" "*Diablos* (damn)," I said to myself. He told me, "You, come here." He was at a distance from me (he points to the trash can in the room). I said to myself, "I'm not afraid of this guy." He said, "You come here, don't try to run because I will run after you." I knew that those guys in the army are good at running. I said, "*¡No, pues ya me clavaron!*" ("Well, they got me now!"). So I went to him, and he told me "put your hands behind your back." And I said, "But why? I just got here." He responded, "Well, that doesn't count, you'll have to tell that to the judge."

As New Orleans day laborers began meeting on different corners of the city the response from home improvement stores (Lowe's or Home Depot), convenience store managers, community residents, the police and National Guard varied. However, the overarching sentiment and actions toward day laborers were negative and unwelcoming. During the two years of volunteering with a community organization involved in organizing day laborers in New Orleans we received constant phone calls from day laborers on the corners informing or requesting assistance from us because they were being confronted, chased off, or arrested by police or National Guard. As a result, the organizers I volunteered with or I would often head to the corners to advocate for the release of workers who were being detained by authorities, or facilitate communication between workers and authorities.

### **Racialized Space**

Indeed, as I began to spend more time on the day labor corners of New Orleans I began to understand the pressure, anxiety, and frustration that day laborers experience when looking for work on the corners of the city. Below, I describe the first time I realized how day labor corners have become and work as racialized spaces:

When I moved to New Orleans I never expected to participate in day labor organizing. I had attended protest, but never actively gone out into a community to work with people on the issues that were impacting their everyday lives. I was excited to take part in this research process, although tentative about what my part would be in the end. Three weeks into my stay in New Orleans one of the organizers I had been working with went on vacation. She would be gone for a few weeks, so I would be accompanying the

other organizer to the corners. Our daily routine began at 8:00 a.m. or so, when I would pick him up at a local drugstore, and then headed to the day labor corners around the city. I already had an idea of what the regular routine was like, and my first “official” morning on the esquinas, I honestly hoped would be uneventful. However, as we arrived to South corner I noticed there were National Guardsmen on the day labor corner. I had seen them there before and had heard from organizers that there were times when they had to go up to Guardsmen and translate for workers, as well as advocate for them. Indeed, the corner was visited at least once a day by the National Guard. This, often times, because the convenience/gas store manager called them up, or because Guardsmen received complaints by others regarding day laborers. However, I had not had to interact with the National Guard before this time. I, a dominant-English speaker, would have to figure out what was happening. The organizer that was with me said, “Ve habla con ellos. Haber porque lo tienen y que van hacer.” (“Go speak to the them. See why they have him and what they are going to do.”). In my mind, I was thinking, “Are you serious?” We briefly spoke with some of the workers and got a brief idea of why the National Guard had detained the young man. Apparently, he and the manager of the store had been arguing, yet nobody was quite sure why. So, I took a deep breath and headed up to the Guardsmen. I could literally feel the blood rushing down my body to my feet. I kept trying to practice quickly how I was going to introduce myself to the officers, and before I knew it I was in front of them. I introduced myself as a volunteer with a community organization, which most of the officers were already familiar with. I asked if I could assist with interpreting for the young man they had detained since none

of them spoke Spanish and were actually waiting for a Spanish-speaking Guardsman to arrive. I said, "Well, I can help." They looked at each other and reluctantly agreed. I think the heat of the New Orleans summer day was probably one of the deciding factors in this, and that since they probably had no real idea how long an interpreter was going to take to arrive they figured I would do. They said, "Tell him that if we see him on the corner again, we're going to have to arrest him. The manager doesn't want him around." I translated the officer's statement. "Do you understand?," the officer asked. I translated, "*Preguntan si comprende.* (They are asking if you understand.\*)" He looked at me and responded in the affirmative. The officer then began talking to me saying, "The manager doesn't want them here anymore. They need to stop standing around the gas pumps and the side of the building." I listened as he told me this, waiting for them to let the young man loose. I had blocked out everyone around me, focusing on getting the young man back to the sidewalk. The Guardsman kept talking and all I wanted to do was get back to a comfortable space, away from them. The Guardsmen let the young man go, and together we began walking toward the rest of the workers. As I was walking off I thanked the Guardsmen and told them to have a good day. I slowly felt like the blood that had rushed to me feet was coming through to the rest of my body, and began to feel the sun on my face. I looked ahead and noticed approximately 25 to 30 day laborers looking at us. They had been watching my interaction with the Guardsmen the whole time. I suddenly felt more nervous, I was not quite sure why. The young organizer asked me what they said and I told him that they just wanted him to not come

around the corner anymore. We both giggled a bit, knowing that that was unlikely to happen.

I reflected on the day's events later in the evening when I arrived at home. The more time I spent on the day labor corners of New Orleans the more I began to realize how *las esquinas* were racialized spaces. Day labor corners around the city were spaces identified and linked to Latino immigrants—to “illegal aliens” as the dominant racist narrative describes them. New Orleans police and National Guard officers, for instance, kept the space, and the workers in it, under constant surveillance. Likewise, day labor corners were places people knew around the city as designated spots where they could pick up “cheap” labor, meaning Latino immigrant workers. As Don Jaime explains when I asked him about the time he spends on the corner looking for work, and whether he worries about his safety when doing so:

Well, ah, ...I'm going to tell you. And you see it every day....we are standing there. The first day I stood on the corner looking for work I felt humiliated, I felt shame standing there because I wasn't used to that, you know? ....I have pride as a worker. And there are a lot of people that...discriminate and they pass by and they give us looks. Others that tell us things, you know, in English. Some of the workers don't understand and they laugh. But the ones that do understand they get down or...they feel like anger, you know.

Day laborers are often the focus of racist and xenophobic comments. As Latino workers their racial-ethnic identity is directly tied to their immigrant status in the U.S. For the most part, their immigration status is assumed to be “illegal.” Thus, in the

context of white supremacy Latino day laborers are positioned at the bottom rungs of the racial hierarchy that privileges whiteness, which has historically been linked to nativity and citizenship (Ngai 2004).

Indeed, the immigration status of day laborers is something that is directly imbued with racial-ethnic meaning. Latino day laborers' "non-white" identity in the context of U.S. white supremacy and in the context of post-Katrina New Orleans, which created their status as the *Other* in the city supports the racist treatment they experience on a daily basis. This racialized experience supports their subjugation and calls for day laborers to be ever-vigilant of their activities in post-Katrina New Orleans.

### **Emotional Work**

Although we may argue that day laborers have their own agency, and are able to decide whether they go to work with a particular employer, they are susceptible to receiving lower wages, or non-payment, labor under poor and dangerous working conditions, and may be threatened or retaliated against with police or immigration if employers want to abuse their position relative to the workers.

Moreover, as previously noted in the sections above, day laboring is not only about standing on a corner looking for work. Reconstruction workers experience numerous added pressures as day laborers. I often wondered what day laborers thought about the hiring process on the corner. What was it like to not know who was hiring you, or where you were going to go to work? It was really a "roll of the dice" or "luck of the draw"—going off to work for the day as a jornalero (day laborer). I asked workers how they felt about looking for work, while many experienced uncertainly and



anxiety because they did not know who would hire them that day and under what kind of working conditions they would labor for the day, for most of them the fear in looking for work was borne out of the fear of immigration and deportation. As Agustin explains:

Yes, yes, I'm always a bit fearful because we do not have a legal permit with which we can identify ourselves. We know that immigration comes to the corner. So I sometimes feel insecure when I'm looking for work because suddenly a car will arrive, they are staring at you and they are from immigration and they can arrest and deport you.

It can be argued that a structural fear and terror has been created in which day laborers live in. They remain hyper-vigilant of their surroundings and remain doubtful of authorities. Indeed, during my time on the corners of New Orleans I learned that ICE agents would arrive at the corners in unmarked vehicles and pass themselves off as contractors. When day laborers got into the vehicles under the assumption that they were going to work for the day, they were informed that they were under immigration custody.

The time that day laborers spend on the corners provides them with the opportunity to meet and create friendships and networking relationships. Rafael explains that while looking for work on the corner is difficult, it also entertaining. Yet, the hardship of not finding work is frustrating.

Like I said, you feel fear while being on the corner because you don't know what's going to happen, but at the same time you spend time with people, right? You have friends. The hardest thing about being on the corner is when you

become frustrated because you don't have work, you don't have money to pay your rent or buy food, right? So that's the fear sometimes, if I don't find work, what will happen? I may have to live on the street, what will happen to my family back home, if immigration comes, what will happen? Or if the police comes, that's the fear.

As a result, it is important to ask what are some of the consequences of living in this state of fear? Indeed, some of the discussions among workers showed a valid distrust of local police authorities and their connection to immigration. Thus, if day laborers experienced theft of wages or nonpayment, were subjected to injury on the job, or experienced violence they were unlikely to report the incident for fear of deportation. And, as day laborers stand on the day labor corners of New Orleans they remain hyper-vigilant and distrustful of their employers. Yet, the need for work often supersedes the reality of fear. More importantly, however, day laborers should not have to live with fear and intimidation in their daily lives. As reconstruction workers to New Orleans, as human beings, they should be able to look for work with dignity.

### **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter I outlined the process of day laboring by discussing the creation of day labor corners in the aftermath of post-Katrina New Orleans. Day labor corners were created once reconstruction work in the city began to slow down in post-Katrina New Orleans. Indeed, during the first weeks and months of clean-up and rebuilding of New Orleans there was no need for workers to stand on day labor corners. On the contrary, workers found abundant employment opportunities. They had been brought to the city

by contractors, lured through advertisements in newspapers, or by word of mouth. Yet, as employment opportunities began to dwindle, workers found the need for the creation of day labor corners. One of the first day labor corners in New Orleans proper was Lee Circle. Immigrant workers began to meet at Lee Circle, located in the CBD of New Orleans, where they regularly found employment opportunities. However, because of the popular location—near tourist attractions—business managers, owners, residents, and city officials began to complain about the Latino men looking for work on Lee Circle. Consequently, day laborers were treated as unwanted, a blemish on the cityscape of New Orleans, and soon ICE raids began to take place in the popular day labor spot.

As a result, Latino immigrant workers were forced to seek out employment opportunities in open-air spaces throughout the rest of the city, creating day labor corners—*las esquinas*. Ultimately, these day labor corners became racialized spaces. Day labor corners were identified as places where disposable Latino labor could be sought out. While the day labor corners provided workers with hiring spots, they also were the spaces where workers were harassed by police and the National Guard, making *las esquinas* a paradox. Moreover, while day laboring provides workers with employment opportunities, the spaces where they seek work are some of the places where they exert the emotional and psychological strains of the day labor process. Indeed, day laboring is more than just searching for work in open-air spaces, although this may seem like the most relevant and obvious issue affecting workers. Day laborers are constantly defending their position as workers by searching for work in racialized spaces. During this time, they are also exerting emotional work—which is less visible, yet remains part

of the day labor process and an important one to continue examining in the future. In the following chapter, I outline how “race” impacts workers’ experiences. For instance, how do workers experience race and the impact it has in relation to their employers and co-workers? How do they understand their status as immigrants and the impact this has on their work opportunities and treatment in the workplace?

## CHAPTER V

### REBUILDING NEW ORLEANS

In the last chapter I discussed the process of seeking work on the day labor corners of post-Katrina New Orleans. This chapter addresses some of the racialized experiences of working in New Orleans. That is, how “race” impacts the day-to-day employment experiences of day laborers? And how “race” affects workers views of other racial-ethnic groups in the city, whether they are co-workers, employers, or those who are not hired to work with them, but who they have perceptions about.

Day laborers participate in a variety of working situations. Many literally “do a little bit of everything.” However the majority of the work is done in the construction industry and includes: demolition work, carpentry, sheetrock work, ceramics, painting, plumbing, electrical work, and roofing. Nonetheless, some workers do gardening or yard work, or may be dishwashers in local establishments. Throughout these work situations they are able interact with a number of different people. They may be working alongside day laborers from the corners, or with people they have never met before. As a result, it is interesting to learn about their work environments. Who are their co-workers and employers? Do their work experiences differ depending on the racial-ethnic identity of these co-workers and employers? Moreover, what is the narrative being told when it comes to why Latino immigrants were hired and keep being a large force behind the rebuilding efforts of the city? What do day laborers feel was and is their part in the reconstruction of the city? These are some of the issues addressed

in this chapter. I begin by addressing some of the hiring situations experienced by day laborers on the corners of New Orleans.

I cannot count the number of hours I spent on the esquinas with day laborers-- they are too many to keep track of, but I can say that the corners became a space I was very familiar with. Therefore, I understood the camaraderie and community that was built on the corners. Indeed, although employment was scarce at times, day laborers looked out for each other. They would warn each other if a particular employer came to the corner and was infamous for nonpayment, or underpayment of wages. Likewise, if a worker was not comfortable doing a particular job, they would call to another jornalero, who was familiar with the work, and in that way assisted each other in finding work for the day. I began to ask who people preferred to work for and with, did the racial-ethnic identity of the person matter?

### **Employers: White, Black, or Latino**

The racial-ethnic identity of an employer, I learned, at the end of the day, mattered little to the workers on the corner simply because *work* was the most important outcome of standing on a day labor corner. Adan explains:

When we are standing on the corner we don't pay attention to that [race of employer]. We just want to work.

Yet, overall, during my discussions with Latino day laborers I found that they preferred being hired by, or working for, white employers. Jornaleros felt and experienced what they considered to be better working conditions and better payment of wages when working for white employers. White employers were the ideal employer to work for,

according to many jornaleros. Indeed as Rafael explains, when I asked him what his experiences have been like with employers, in general:

Rafael: Well the white employer...depending...there are white employers that are bad, but the white employers I have had, a lot of the times give you a few more breaks, well...the Hispanic employer doesn't. He doesn't provide you with lunch or anything. But I have also worked with white employers that give you breaks but they don't provide food nor water or anything, so you have to take everything.

ALM: Have you worked with black employers?

Rafael: Like twice, with two black men, but those men were really good to me. Overall, white employers were the ones whom jornaleros preferred to be hired by. They were described as more thoughtful because, for instance, they provided breaks and paid workers on time. For the most part, white employers were "good" employers. Day laborers were also, at times, more likely to individualize their experiences with employers. For instance, when referring to white and black employers, in particular, they would not generalize bad work experiences with one white or black employer to *all* white or black employers. For instance, as Adan explained that the experiences with employers varied:

There are employers eh...whites that are calm. But there are some that get angry.

Likewise, when speaking of black employers, as Enrique explained:

Ah..let me tell you, sometimes they make you work...a bit more than white

employers, but it has gone well for me.

Yet, the discussions about day laborers' experiences with Latino employers did not follow the same overall patterns as the ones with white and black employers. Although some day laborers did individualize their experiences with Latino employers, the majority of day laborers distrusted Latino employers. During my interview with Ricardo I spoke with him about this situation. He explained that day laborers prefer not to work with Latino employers. I asked him why this was the case and he responded "we, ourselves [Latinos], don't like each other." Our conversation then led to a discussion about Latino employers taking advantage of the fact that day laborers on the corners are, for the most part, undocumented immigrants. Our discussion began with me asking him, "Do you believe that they take advantage of the fact that workers on the corner do not have *papeles* (immigration papers)?"

Ricardo: Ah, of course. Yes.

ALM: What do you think they believe?

Ricardo: They think 'He won't do anything. What will he do if he doesn't have papeles [immigration papers]. He's afraid.' Here's another thing when we go to work...with a...an American, he'll begin to interview you. He'll say, "How long have you been here?" Then...I think, he's beginning to ask questions. Your mind begins to work. *Porque me quieren chingar*. (They want to fuck me over.) That's why he's asking me these questions. I was going to work with a chilango (person from Mexico City)...and he asked me, "Hey, do you know how to do this?" "Yes." "Let's go then. How much time do you have here?", he asked me.



“Ah”, I said. “I’ve lived here for twelve years.” “Do you have papeles (papers)?” “Not right now, I lost them.”, I responded.

As day laborers pointed out, while the conversations with Latino employers may be facilitated by the use of Spanish by both groups, Latino employers are often distrusted. Ricardo, and other day laborers, was more likely to attribute this distrust to past experiences and connected this distrust with the issue of immigration status. Consequently, day laborers are more cautious and less likely to work for Latino employers. Moreover, if they do work for Latino employers they are more likely to ask for their pay at the end of each work day, because they are less trusting of them.

#### **Co-workers: White, Black, and Latino**

Likewise, day laborers, overall, did not have many bad experiences with their co-workers. However, there were situations when Latino co-workers were less preferred by day laborers, when these co-workers were legal residents or U.S. citizens. Indeed, the complexities of race and citizenship have been addressed by Morales (2008). Morales (2008:54) provides a theoretical framework in assessing the importance of citizenship, whereby, she states, the processes of “ethnicity is formed along citizenship/nativity lines leading to differential utility of ethnicity between immigrants and their native-born counterparts.” This signifies that although racial-ethnic identities may be similar, they are used differently depending on the nativity or documented status of people. For instance, Agustin illustrates the advantages and privileges of documented status and his experiences with Latino co-workers.

Agustin: Sometimes the ones that are ignorant, let's say, I call them ignorant. I have worked with Hispanics that have attained their residency and they think they are American, they think they are people with a lot of power. And sometimes they want to treat us how they want to treat us, they want to treat us bad. Always imposing the work on us. In that sense, well, these situations are racist. Or they are ignorant. And they punish us even as Hispanic co-workers while on the job.

ALM: Why do you think they do that?

Agustin: I think it's the lack of—the lack of education. The lack of education and the lack of knowledge. Because sometimes they begin to think that because they are now residents, because they now feel more validated, well, more valued than those that are here that don't have papers (authorized status).

Indeed, immigration status remains a vital issue for Latino day laborers in New Orleans. Not having “papeles” (papers), or authorized status, as I mentioned in the previous chapter permeates every aspect of a day laborers life experiences. It creates fear and vulnerable working conditions for jornaleros. In the next sections I address this issue more closely.

### **Latinos and the Issue of “Sin Papeles”**

Some day laborers were cautious about going to work with Latino employers. I often heard this to be the case while standing on the corners with workers. Latino contractors would drive up and workers would not go up to the trucks to speak with them like they did when White or Black employers showed up on the corners. I would ask different

workers why that was the case. They explained that Latino employers took advantage of them. Latino employers often did not pay them or underpaid them for their work, or expected them to complete the jobs faster than White or Black employers. I asked jornaleros why they believed that Latino employers took advantage of them in this way. Interestingly, they attributed these acts to immigration status or citizenship issues. For instance, when speaking with Don Ramiro during a formal interview he explained why jornaleros prefer to not be employed by Latino employers and why that was the case.

Don Ramiro: Yes, in certain, eh, occasions we don't like to go to work with Hispanic contractors.

ALM: Hispanics? Tell me about that...

Don Ramiro: Because Hispanic contractors, although we understand them...they are people we can understand, one understands them well, they work you really hard and then in the end there are some who say, "look, well, you know I can't pay you everything. I am going to give you half of the day's pay and tomorrow you'll keep working. I will pay you at the end of the week." And they keep giving us the minimum and at the end of the week they don't even pay us.

ALM: Why do you think that is the case with Hispanics?

Don Ramiro: Um...I can't tell...well I don't know. I think that they...I think that they take advantage of the situation we find ourselves in. That we can't do anything about it.

ALM: Why?

Don Ramiro: Because we aren't protected by any law. The law does not protect us. So they take advantage of the fact that they are from here, that they are residents or maybe naturalized citizens. So they have all the rights. So they think of us as less.

Indeed, although jornaleros were able to communicate with Latino employers because they were both more likely to speak Spanish, that is also at times how employers take advantage of the vulnerability of workers' undocumented status in the U.S. even when they share a common or similar racial-ethnic identity.

### **Why Employers Decide to Hire Latino Workers Rather than Black Workers**

I asked workers why they believed Latinos and not members of another racial-ethnic group were the ones that participated as reconstruction workers in post-Katrina. That is, why they were the first to come to New Orleans to take on the rebuilding of the city after the storm. Day laborers often responded that Latinos take on this type of labor because they are a "cheap" labor source that employers and contractors take advantage of hiring. For instance, Cesar explains:

Cesar: For one, for me, one of the things was the contamination that there was in the city...And another thing for me is that we, we are a cheap source of labor...and others (referring to black folks) were afraid to come and clean up a contaminated city. ...They pay whites and blacks more than they do Latino workers. Because, because they don't have papers (authorized status)...that's the way it is.

ALM: So...they take advantage of that...

Cesar: Exactly, the companies take advantage of that, of hiring Latinos who work longer hours and at lower pay...and the work ends up being done faster.

Closely linked to the issue of defining Latino workers as a source of cheap and disposable labor is the narrative that Black Orleanians did not come to rebuild the city because they did not want to or were not interested in doing so. However, in the following passage Rafael provides a critical analysis of the situation that Latino and Black workers find themselves in. It speaks of the complexities of race and poverty affecting both communities of color in New Orleans. Indeed, Rafael and other day laborers are beginning to understand the inequalities created and supported by racist and exploitative systems of inequality. Rafael explains:

Rafael: I don't know, I think that in this city there are two poor communities, right? The black community and the Latino community. But the black community, they exercise their rights, right? They will say, we are going to do this work but you have to pay us what is just. When the government saw that that is what was happening, that's when they began to bring in Latinos, a community without papers (authorized immigration), a community that doesn't speak the language, and also a community that they could do whatever they wanted to do with, right? They don't have to pay them for their work, pay them less than minimum wage, discriminate against them, that's what's happened, right?

ALM: Have you ever heard an employer or someone else say "I hire Latinos because they are better workers?"

Rafael: Yes, that's what they all say.

ALM: What do they say?

Rafael: They say they prefer Latinos because they're better at working, right?

And you, when you hear that you feel like great, you say 'that's great, I'm a good worker,' and they say, "we don't hire blacks because they're lazy," that's what they say but reality is different, right? Yes they hire Latinos that's true, maybe he is better at working, maybe he's like a *burro* (animal/ass) at working, but they pay him whatever they want. While a black worker knows his rights, and knows that they have to pay him what is just, that's why they don't hire him to work. That's the reality.

ALM: Who have you heard that from?

Rafael: From white and Hispanic employers. Sometimes from black contractors.

ALM: Have you heard employers who say, "I contract Latinos because of a particular reason, and not whites or blacks?"

Indeed, as I began to probe more and more during formal and informal interviews and conversations with day laborers, I heard the narratives of "Latinos as good workers" and "Blacks as bad or lazy workers" as a common recurrence. During a formal interview with Tomas he illustrates how "race" works in keeping Black and Latino workers divided. That is, employers use a naturalization frame (Bonilla-Silva 2003) when justify hiring Latino workers over Black workers because Latino workers are harder or more reliable workers. Consequently, many Latino workers end up adopting this frame, which "normalize[s] events or actions that could otherwise be

interpreted as racially motivated (residential segregation) or racist (preference for whites as friends or partners)” (Bonilla-Silva 2003:37). Likewise, employers use a cultural racism frame, “arguing that minorities’ standing is a product of their lack of effort, loose family organization, and inappropriate values” (Bonilla-Silva 2003:39-40). This frame is frequently used when referring to Black workers as lazy and arrogant and is adopted by Latino workers.

ALM: Do you think that the employer uses this against you? Not having papers he says, ‘Ah well...’

Tomas: Of course he does.

ALM: What, what does he say...?

Tomas: Yes. Yes. Because they can say, ‘No well this guy doesn’t have papers, what can he do.’ In their mind they say, ‘No you are Latino I don’t have to...’ And there are a lot of Americans that do not like that we, Latinos, right, take away their jobs because of that. There is like always...there is racism. So they see that. Right, that...they do that. Because one time on the corner. I am going to tell you this...eh...A black American, American from here... well...he was taking us to work, me and another guy, the other one speaks English. He understood and he told him, ‘Why are you taking those Indians to work, take us. We are from here.’ So the boss replied, ‘No because you are...the Latinos are better workers and you all are more arrogant. I lived that experience here. And that is what they tell us Latinos, they prefer us because we do hard work...and maybe blacks don’t because they are more arrogant. And so they do not like that.

I was curious of where these narratives came from, were these ideas that jornaleros had or did they hear them from someone. Enrique, and other workers, provide some insight into how the narrative of “us” versus “them”—that is “Latino workers” versus “Black workers” allows for the division and exploitation of workers of color. I asked Enrique what he had heard about the hiring practices of employers. Why did they hire Latino workers on the corners?

Enrique: I have heard them say that they prefer Latinos because they work harder, and more...meaning that they work faster than other groups. Because of that reason. It is out of necessity that they keep you in that job. If you work fast, the employer will supposedly be happy. But in reality he won't be happy, he will be happy that he is earning money, so he's not happy that you're working a lot. If he were happy...if he wanted to be happy he would tell you... work less, work slower. Because generally speaking the...black and whites work slower. And I have heard them say, “I prefer...Latinos because they work faster.”

ALM: Who? Who have you heard say this? What race are these employers?

Enrique: Generally they are white.

ALM: Generally they are white?

Enrique: Yes, generally white employers say this. I haven't heard a black employer say this.

ALM: And he said that “Latinos work...”

Enrique: Faster.

ALM: Has he said anything about black or white workers?



Enrique: Sometimes they...white employers will say that blacks work...that...they don't work.

ALM: That they don't work?

Enrique: Yes, I have heard them say that. That they don't work, so... And that is why they say that Latinos are better...because there is a need that makes them [Latinos] work faster than any other group.

These situations and dominant racist framings are the ones that jornaleros are learning and working with in post-Katrina New Orleans. They are constantly reminded by employers, who exploit the fact that jornaleros may not speak English or may be undocumented in order to support a “hard Latino worker” narrative. Likewise, jornaleros hear that “Blacks are lazy workers,” which creates a barrier to understanding the historical and contemporary racial-ethnic disparities that keep poor Blacks in subordinate positions of power.

### **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter I outlined how “race” impacts some of the day-to-day work experiences of day laborers in post-Katrina New Orleans, and how immigration status becomes a racialized characteristic that day laborers have to negotiate. These negotiations take place in the hiring process and in their work environments. “Latino” and “immigrant” are imbued with racial characteristics. They often mean the same thing to day laborers in New Orleans, and both are often used against them by employers and co-workers in order to maintain and reproduce exploitative labor situations. These exploitative situations continuously disadvantage workers of color in New Orleans. In particular,

Latino day laborers who are constantly identified as part of a “problem” or social “ill.”

Likewise, it is also important to note that white supremacy remains a working part of the dominant narrative that day laborers are learning in post-Katrina New Orleans. As Tomas, and others, note the narrative being told is that: *morenos son malos, los negros son malos. Los negros muy malos me dicen* (blacks are bad, the blacks are bad. They tell me blacks are very bad.) This is most frequently the cautious tale provided by white employers to Latino day laborers. Moreover, employers also use racist frames in order to take advantage of Latino workers by creating the narrative of Latino workers are “better and faster” and Black workers as “arrogant and lazy.” These racist narratives are sustained and reproduced over and over again in order to maintain a racist hierarchy, which keeps workers of color at the bottom rungs of the racial hierarchy. In the following chapter I discuss day labor organizing in post-Katrina New Orleans. Day labor organizing has become an important part of day laboring in post-Katrina New Orleans, and has created resistance strategies and the building of community among workers in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

## **CHAPTER VI**

### **DAY LABOR ORGANIZING**

This chapter illustrates some of the organizing efforts taken on by day laborers in post-Katrina New Orleans. I discuss some of the motivating factors impacting workers' decisions to organize. As I previously stated in the methods chapter of this dissertation, my initial research project was not focused on day labor organizing. Yet, as my research project expanded and my experiences in the field were impacted by the everyday realities of day laboring in New Orleans, I became involved with day labor organizing throughout the city. I was inspired by the organizing actions of day laborers, as a disenfranchised community of workers, and how they, with the guidance of community organizers, came together as reconstruction workers in New Orleans. In the following sections I provide a brief overview of the literature on Latino and immigrant organizing, discuss the importance of reframing Latino immigrant day laborers as reconstruction workers in post-Katrina New Orleans, their participation in community organizing, and their motivation for organizing in the city.

#### **Latina/o and Immigrant Organizing**

A broad portion of the literature examining Latino and immigrant labor organizing efforts illustrate the struggles and successes within union organizing (Clawson 2003; Milkman 2000). Unions in the United States are facing shifting balances of power and “recruiting immigrant workers into union ranks has become increasingly central to the larger project of rebuilding the United States labor movement, which has been in a downward spiral for decades” (Milkman 2000:1). Over the past several decades, union

participation by Latino and immigrant workers has been higher among Latinos born in the United States, or by those having secure immigrant status, when compared to U.S.-born Whites. Indeed, Latino workers join unions at higher rates than U.S.-born whites (Rosenfeld and Kleykamp 2009).

Moreover, existing literature examines the ability of organizing immigrant workers, arguing that immigrant workers are more organizable than other workers in the U.S. (Milkman 2000). This in particular is thought to be the case because of the collective action and militant practices that immigrant workers may be exposed to in their countries of origin (Milkman 2006). Indeed, some scholars believe immigrants may be the best hope for a revitalized labor movement (Clawson 2003; Jayaraman and Ness 2005). Consequently, immigrant labor organizing has proven to be a central focus in communities throughout the United States. For instance, community projects and organizations have seen the importance of building strong community membership and leadership among immigrant workers. These efforts have centered on the collective power of workers, focusing on workers' team building efforts and their leadership toward social and economic justice (Jayaraman 2005).

More recent research has examined day labor organizing, which has become a more central focus in communities around the country. The academic literature on day labor organizing has primarily addressed the obstacles faced in organizing immigrant day laborers around the creation of day labor centers, or hiring halls. Camou (2009a), for instance, finds that the contrasting meanings behind day labor organizing in Denver, Colorado surrounding the creation of day labor worker centers were different for

workers and organizers. In this case, immigrant workers framed the meaning of centers around material rewards (e.g. employment and resolution of work grievances), while organizers framed the creation of the centers in terms of collective action, justice, and solidarity (Camou 2009a). Indeed, in Baltimore and Denver, the cultural systems in which day laborers operate are guided by self-reliance and material well-being (Camou 2009b). Consequently, “solidarity is not immediate and, in some day labour communities, organizers may lack access to the types of personal social networks that historically have facilitated immigrant organizing (Camou 2009b:3). Moreover, organizers and immigrant workers in the Deep South face a particular set of obstacles. The Deep South has experienced changing demographics over the last several decades sparking interest in the changing social and political dynamics of communities experiencing new influxes of Latino immigrants. Indeed, as previously mentioned in Chapter II, the Deep South, along with the Midwest and parts of the West became new destinations for immigrant populations—specifically Latinos—beginning in the 1980s (Vásquez et al. 2008) This as a result of the passage IRCA in 1986, which provided legal status to previously undocumented immigrants, subsequently facilitating their mobility throughout the country (Vásquez et al. 2008). However, unlike cities in North Carolina and Georgia, where a particular industry (e.g., poultry) attracted immigrants (Vásquez et al. 2008), New Orleans did not experience great shifts in migration as a consequence of the amendments. And, while New Orleans has historically experienced different waves of migration (see Fussell 2007b) post-Katrina migration, we can argue, has particular meaning and relevance in the context of structural inequality and racist America.

Consequently, organizers and workers in New Orleans may face a different set of obstacles not encountered in traditional gateway cities like, Los Angeles and Chicago. In New Orleans day labor organizing is centered on issues of social, racial, and economic justice, which have been deeply rooted in the fight against systemic racism. Indeed, organizers and workers in the South are clearly experiencing the challenges of white supremacy that has created, supported, and reproduced White-on-Black oppression. With the influx of Latino immigrants to the South social justice activists have had to reexamine their organizing efforts. Smith (2006) writes that organizers and social justice activists in the South are unfamiliar with some of the issues faced by immigrants. In fact:

when immigration to the South began to escalate sharply in the 1990s, many social justice organizations were ill prepared to respond. Unfamiliar with the issues facing new immigrants—legal status, access to driver’s licenses, language barriers, etc.—organizations both large and small were in many cases also preoccupied with fundamental questions of political direction and financial viability (Smith 2006:237).

Consequently, in a time of heightened racist and xenophobic sentiment in a post 9/11 United States, community organizers and workers in the South experience various obstacles in their organizing efforts. In New Orleans, immigrant workers have begun to establish themselves in a city with a rich cultural, social, and economic history rooted in systemic racism. The efforts of Latino immigrants toward becoming New Orleanians

and gaining social and economic justice are met with backlash from the community, police, and city officials.

In the days following the devastating aftermath of Hurricane Katrina many began to wonder how people would begin to rebuild their lives, and the city of New Orleans. The systemically racist structures affecting Black New Orleanians were clear and ever-present. Critical examinations of “the ways in which humankind created the physical and social landscape the storm landed on and the way in which persons and institutions responded to that crisis” are still being addressed today (Erikson 2007:xx). Indeed, a national debate addressing these issues began to take shape, yet during this time the city was being rebuilt. After the storm Latino immigrants began the arduous and dangerous task of rebuilding New Orleans. Indeed, some of the first cleanup responders to the New Orleans and other Gulf Coast areas were Latino immigrants (Fussell 2009a). Hurricanes Katrina (August 2009) and Rita (September 2005) had impacted an area of 90,000 square miles (Erikson2007:xx), attracting Latino immigrant workers, along with U.S.-born workers, to the gulf areas.

### **Reconstruction Workers**

I worked for a couple of weeks with the two day labor organizers before going to the corners, learning about how they began organizing and their everyday routines. I also learned the importance of creating an identity that rooted day laborers to New Orleans. Indeed, organizers and day laborers speak of immigrant workers to post-Katrina New Orleans as reconstruction workers. I began to understand, in those first few weeks of meeting with workers and organizers, the importance of taking ownership of the dignity

of the work process and the issues of justice tied to it. It became apparent that day laborers are reconstruction workers and many of them speak with great pride of the work they have done in order to rebuild New Orleans. For many workers New Orleans is now their home, too. As a result, workers have felt the need to organize and mobilize as a collective.

Some day laborers who participate in the Congreso are familiar with organizing practices since they have participated in *sindicatos*—unions—in their countries of origin. However, the majority of workers are new to community organizing. The most obvious reasons for organizing or participating in the Congreso are to build collective action and power for fighting against poor working conditions, harassment, and the theft of wages. Moreover, the undergirding issues of social, racial, and economic justice resonate in the organizing activities of the Congreso. Don Jaime is an active member of the Congreso and his motivation for joining the organization began when he witnessed the harassment of day laborers on the corner. He explains that the police and National Guard were chasing day laborers off of the corner:

Look [giggles] there are many motives as to why I began to participate in the Congreso. Many motives. I decided to participate when I saw a day labor organizer defending workers on the corner against the military. They were chasing us off the corner and they were arresting others, they would hit workers, you know? I noticed that she (day labor organizer) was arguing with them, and she asked us to stand on the sidewalk. They (officers) were satisfied but didn't think she would be able to keep us on the sidewalk because they thought we were



a bunch of...how do I want to say it...the police wanted to say that we were a bunch of animals, you know? A White officer. Later there was an officer, I think he was Hispanic that was walking around with a baton. So then...I said to myself...this young woman why is she fighting for us...

Certainly, many day laborers were inspired by the support and advocacy efforts provided by day labor organizers. Workers often expressed feelings of anger and frustration as they were being harassed by authorities. Day laborers are particularly vulnerable in these spaces. Indeed, they did not only experience harassment from police or the National Guard, but also experience yelling from drivers passing by the corner in their cars. However, day laborers are resilient and remain steadfast in their efforts toward protecting their esquinas. Many feel like they are not doing anything wrong—*“no estamos haciendo nada malo”*—they are simply looking for work in a city that received them and supported their work efforts from the very beginning. Certainly, the U.S. government supported their participation as reconstruction workers when it allowed for their employment by contractors. Yet, as time passed, workers began to feel the pressure of “immigrant” and “Latino” status in New Orleans. Many began to feel, see, and experience persecution because they were identified as such.

During a time when day laborers were being physically harassed by police and the National Guard, they knew there were day labor organizers advocating for them. As tensions grew on the corners between workers and the authorities many began to see the supportive response and actions of day labor organizers. As a result, day laborers began

participating in Congreso meetings and were motivated to advocate for their rights as reconstruction workers.

### **Wage Theft**

One of the issues highlighted by day laborers is that of wage theft. There were times when I would pull up to a day labor corner and notice the blank stares and see the desperate situation workers would find themselves in as a result of not finding work. It was palpable, and workers began to feel added stress and frustration when wage theft occurred. Day laborers would go out for a day's work, sometimes after weeks or months of not working, and find that at the end of the day they were not being paid for their labor. Don Joaquin illustrates his experience with wage theft:

He (the employer) left us at the worksite without paying us. He owed each of us \$500, each one of us. There were four of us.

Moreover, Gabriel explains:

Right now we have a *problema* (problem) when it comes to no work, the theft of wages, discrimination, police harassment, we don't have any security. So, we are not doing well.

Indeed, frustrated by the theft of wages, among other issues, day laborers began to mobilize to fight against wage theft. During the course of three months in winter 2008, day laborers with the assistance of day labor organizers and volunteers, created a wage theft survey and proceeded to interview workers on the corners of New Orleans about this issue. They wanted to provide city council members and the mayor of New Orleans, Ray Nagin, with concrete numbers on wage theft. The collective efforts of day

laborers, organizers, and volunteers garnered 304 interviews, finding 483 separate incidents of wage theft over the course of 2008. Employer wage theft totaled \$400,144 (NOWCRJ: June 2009).

It was inspiring to see day laborers taking action against the issues affecting them on a daily basis. They did not expect organizers to complete the interviews; instead they would take turns and volunteer to complete the interviews themselves. Likewise, they encouraged other day laborers to take part in the survey process. And, during meetings with city council members they were the ones speaking about the issues affecting their lives. Indeed, while some city council members expected the English-speaking organizer to be the only one to speak during scheduled meetings, she was sure to not take the lead during meetings. This made it clear that she was an interpreter and advocate, and workers were the ones speaking of the economic injustices affecting them. Day laborers showed confidence during these meetings and became a united front against wage theft. Likewise, during a conference held at Loyola University workers asked for support of attendees on the issue of wage theft, asking for their signatures on postcards that would be presented to city council members. Day laborers have certainly taken active roles in organizing activities. They began realizing that if they became their own advocates their voices would be heard, although change may take time and patience.

### **Organizing to Rebuild New Orleans**

The Congreso has become a staple among Latino day laborers in the corners of New Orleans. When speaking with Adrian about his participation in community organizing and why he chose to participate in the Congreso, he says:

I liked the Congreso. The day labor organizer, you all, all of you, the Congreso has helped me. And it is a family as well, do you know what I mean? One sees things and that the Congreso worries about Latinos and wants them to learn, that people will open their eyes to the issues affecting the Latino community.

I asked Adrian to elaborate on this and he added:

To learn about all sorts of experiences, wage theft, to learn about work situations and open up to learning. To learn about others' experiences. And well, I have liked participating with the Congreso de Jornaleros a lot. What do I like? I like everything. And thanks to them, to everyone, I hope this will continue.

El Congreso has provided workers with opportunities to build community among Latino day laborers. Day laborers may also participate in other organizations, such as church activities, but, for the most part, day laborers in the esquinas of New Orleans know the Congreso is a steadfast advocate of their efforts and facilitated the creation of leadership among day laborers. Indeed, as a result of racism day laborers have joined actions, marches, and protests throughout the city—advocating for their rights as well as the rights of other disenfranchised communities—in particular Black New Orleanians.

### **Creating Community**

Enrique first became familiar with day labor organizing while looking for work at a day labor corner in New Orleans. During that time organizers were distributing booklets to workers so that they could keep track of their work days and hours, and employer information. After a while one of the current Congreso organizers invited Enrique to a meeting. Since then he has participated in day labor organizing. During our interview he said:

...I have stayed on, because the atmosphere is agreeable. The group isn't from one community that is they aren't all from one country. The group is made up from whatever country wants to join, and we are all received the same way. And we are treated the same, so as I mentioned before, I am against divisions, and that is what I like about this organization, that they help you, and they understand you without caring where you come from, and we are a group, well we come together, from Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Mexico, Brazil, Peru. Wherever people are from they come here, and we are a community... We are from different countries and we identify as Latinos and we are together. We are united, and that is my experience here, that people are taken into account. This organization and it's repeated every time we come to meetings, 'if it wasn't for you, if you don't participate, we can't work,' that means that they are taking us into consideration, the principal factor of this organization is the people, and people's needs. So...that is my experience here, and I have liked it a lot, and so I am invited to other organizations and I don't attend, because other organizations

are from particular countries, the ones that I have known of, they are made of people from one country, that isn't good, because marking divisions between us makes us weak. And to be strong we have to be united. So unity is what I like about this organization.

Some of the day laborers I have spoken with plan to adopt the organizing practices they have learned in New Orleans and continue using them when they leave the city. Indeed, I believe this is a result of the efforts made by day labor organizers of the NOWCRJ and their focus on creating strong community building efforts among day laborers. As Clawson (2003:10) illustrates, a good organizer "...brings out the best in workers, helps develop their talents and capacities, and makes it possible to forge a solidarity that is rooted in people's small work groups but reaches beyond to include people the worker has not previously known." During a formal interview with Agustin I asked him what was one of the best experiences of living in the United States. He responded:

Agustin: The best experience that I have had is working with the Congreso de Jornaleros.

ALM: Really?

Agustin: Yes, because it has always provided us with ideas about how to fight for our rights and how we can represent ourselves when we face discrimination. Only this organization, well, has provided us with ideas, it has provided us with techniques to use so that those that discriminate against us don't manipulate us.

ALM: Can you give me an example of how they have taught you this?

Agustin: Well, the direction, toward organizing. The way in which we can convince people to join a—a great group of people. And, how would I say it, work with a great group of people, and take advantage of different experiences. Unite people, join meetings, and when we are in groups, we begin to share experiences and through the use of this technique we can do something. And that's what I've always liked a lot.

Agustin, and others like him, may not attend all meetings, or voice their opinions during meetings, but they have learned how to fight for their rights as reconstruction workers. They know where to go when they need resources or support. They also know that they are not alone, and that other workers are there to support them.

Likewise, some Congreso members, while quiet and unassuming during meetings, have been constant sources of support for other workers. For instance, after the Congreso assisted Ismael and six other workers in fighting against an arrest and possible deportation after being accused of theft during the clean-up efforts following Hurricane Ike, he became an active member of the Congreso. Ismael notes that he began to attend meetings because of the assistance he received from the organization and explains his reasons for joining the Congreso:

I can continue to help those who helped me. Thanks to those here I am in New Orleans, and that is why I like coming to meetings and listening. I don't really speak a lot but I like to learn and, well, I like to tell people what happens here like, like learning about our rights.

Ismael has continued to invite his friends to Congreso meetings and is supportive of organizing efforts. He, like other workers, has learned the importance of solidarity and collective action. Likewise, he and other workers are present in actions that may be fighting for the cause of a specific day laborer, because they know they may need the support at another time. Throughout their time in New Orleans they have learned and experienced that without collective action change is less likely to occur.

I believe this is reflective of the use of the concept “power-with” that Jayaraman (2005) writes is used by Guinier and Torres (2002) in *The Miner’s Canary*. Day laborers are beginning to be the leaders of their own struggle. Day labor organizers have built a framework that creates leaders who advocate for their own struggle toward fighting for justice and an understanding of the systemic racism and political issues affecting day laborers in New Orleans. During the end of my two year tenure with the Congreso I witnessed the growth and strength built within membership. Leaders began emerging. Besides their continued participation in actions, protests, meetings throughout the city with council members or with allies, they also became more active facilitators of meetings. The two organizers, who were used to facilitating meetings, began taking a back seat during weekly Congreso meetings. Organizers showed day laborers how agendas were created, and assisted them with facilitating weekly Congreso meetings, which led to members leading weekly meetings on their own. Likewise, members who emerged as leaders were continuously encouraged to take part in projects and workshops, and encouraged other day laborers to join the Congreso.



### **Building Alliances**

Reaching out to other communities particularly Black New Orleanians has been an on-going effort within the Congreso. Day laborers have learned about the issues facing Black New Orleanians and have supported their fight for justice, particularly around issues of fair housing. Congreso members have formed alliances with other organizations. And while some day laborers may only attend the Congreso they are becoming more aware of the importance of alliance building and the injustices faced by other communities throughout the city. During formal interviews with workers I asked whether they attended organizations in the community. Don Jaime, who emerged as a consistent figure and leader within the Congreso shared the following with me:

Look I only attend the...the organization of...of workers. We organize on the corner. And right now we are...expanding more, I am learning about more organizations. I am beginning to become more aware that, that we have the need to be related with each other, all of us together. So we can have more power.

Don Jaime's evaluation of building alliances and creating strength within disenfranchised communities in the city was something that was shared by others. Workers began to understand the importance of supporting other organizations in the city, realizing that the fight against injustice was an issue for others—particularly Black New Orleanians. They began to understand that Black New Orleanians, although citizens of the U.S.—experienced injustices. For instance, at first workers would be surprised by the fact that Black workers in the city were facing issues of inequality and injustice. They would say, “but they’re from here [the U.S] and they still have to deal

with wage theft?” Consequently, Congreso members have supported the efforts of Restaurant Opportunities Center (ROC) in their fight against labor injustice. For example, during a Friday night on Bourbon Street Congreso members joined the efforts of ROC at a vigil outside of restaurant that has consistently underpaid its workers. ROCs fight against bad jobs, low-wages/nonpayment, to name a few of the issues faced by service workers in New Orleans, resonated with Congreso members.

### **Organizing for the Future**

One of the motivating factors influencing day labor participation in organizing efforts revolves around the future of other Latino immigrants and workers to New Orleans. Day laborers are not only reflecting on their own futures—social, economic, and political positions—but also remain socially conscious of the future situations faced by Latino newcomers to the city. During a formal interview with Hector, a long-standing member of the Congreso, I asked him why he began participating in day labor organizing. His response, I believe reflects the views of many other Congreso members:

I believe that good things, they may not happen right away in a day, maybe not even in a month, or a year, but I think about the future. For example, what we are doing here or what we do today, maybe we'll leave, we may not benefit from our actions, because we may no longer be here...but those that come to New Orleans, because they'll keep coming to New Orleans, the way I see it. People will keep migrating to New Orleans, because they always face the same problems, things aren't improving. So we're organizing, for that, so that if we don't last here, someday we'll see something good come out of it. And so that

those that arrive after we do, so they won't have to go through what we are going through, so that they will do better. They may be members of our own family, maybe my family member, or that of a neighbor or friend. Someone of our community will be able to benefit, some day, maybe the situation will be better for them, and hopefully, we'll also be able to enjoy them as well.

Indeed, day labor organizing in New Orleans has created advocacy and solidarity among workers. Many day laborers express the need for looking toward the future—not only their own but that of Latino newcomers. Like Hector, other day laborers realize that they may not benefit from the actions they take today toward justice building in the city; still, they hope for a better New Orleans and remain steadfast in creating a collective movement whose efforts are grounded in social, racial, and economic justice. As Enrique shared during our interview:

Because I am Mexican. Discrimination feels bad. And when you are just arriving it feels much worse, because it's your first time and you say...shit...that's how people are treated here? Sometimes you start to become involved, and you even want to act in the same way. But you have to have firm principle, of how things are. And I said no, no I can't act the same way.

Because if I wasn't that way in Mexico... I have always been against divisions, against racism, against people that are like that, I can't come here and become accustomed to treating people that way. That is why I'm a member of the Congreso, because I believe in justice. And people's dignity....and principally in unity. Not on the division of races or of...the [divisions] of this country.

Certainly, not every day laborer who searches for work on the corners of New Orleans participates in the Congreso. There are workers who will attend meetings when they need assistance with a particular situation (e.g., translation during a court visit or doctor's appointment), but for those who do participate the organizing efforts that they have participated in has provided them with a cause for mobilization. Many day laborers realize that change in the city is possible and that their work and dignity is something that they wish to fight for. As Enrique states coming together as a community is part of the initial struggle, but in the end without day laborers' participation little change can occur in the city.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter reveals some of the resistance strategies used by Latino day laborers living in New Orleans. Day laborers remain a particularly vulnerable population in New Orleans. They have faced constant harassment National Guard, police, security guards, and people yelling obscenities and disparaging racist and xenophobic remarks from cars. Yet, there is a certain amount of resiliency and dignity that is shown by the workers on the corners. Many have now made New Orleans home, part of their daily life is looking for work in a city they are helping rebuild. Many know and feel that they are not doing anything wrong as they take part in day laboring on the corners of New Orleans. And, as a result, have begun to organize and advocate for their rights as reconstruction workers

Indeed, the strength of the Congreso has provided day laborers with leadership skills and advocated for their continued participation in actions, protests, and membership recruitment. These actions have provided Latino immigrants in the city with

the opportunity to voice their concerns and demands for social justice in post-Katrina New Orleans. Likewise, day laborers are cognizant of the future they are creating for themselves and others within the community, and establishing the opportunities needed in order to gain leverage in the city they have helped rebuild. In some of my first meetings with the Congreso in July 2008 there was a steady participation of 15-20 day laborers at weekly meetings, by the time I left New Orleans members were overflowing the conference room of the New Orleans Workers' Center for Racial Justice. The walls of the NOWCRJ reverberated with enthusiasm as workers gathered for weekly meetings. Their efforts and engagement in day labor organizing have now become part of their everyday lives and efforts toward building a better Nuevo Orleans. In the following chapter I outline some of the limitations of this research project, future research agendas, as well as, policy implications impacting day laborers in post-Katrina New Orleans.

## CHAPTER VII

### CONCLUSION

This research not only underscores the crucial role that Latino day laborers play as non-standard workers in a racialized labor market, historically organized along a black/white continuum. It also, ultimately, reveals the challenges faced by reconstruction workers who are building their lives in New Orleans—whether that is for the short run, or whether they end up calling New Orleans home. As a result, it is important to keep in mind the power dynamics situated around “race” among day laborers in post-Katrina New Orleans. This is important when considering the rights of day laborers as reconstruction workers and of other workers of color, primarily Black New Orleanians, in the city.

Indeed, the racial hierarchy positioning workers of color at the lower rungs of the labor market are ever-present in New Orleans. As a result, it is imperative to re-frame the relationships between Latino immigrants and Black New Orleanians in the city. The use of racist frames that divide the two groups of workers continue to provide advantages and privileges to those in power—in this case, employers exploiting the work of reconstruction workers. These conversations are being had in Congreso meetings, where they are problematizing the naturalization of Latinos as “hard workers” and the cultural racist frame of Black New Orleanians as “lazy or too proud” to contribute in the reconstruction of the city. It is also important to begin to have these conversations with Black workers, so that any animosity felt against Latino immigrants is addressed.

### **Limitation of the Current Study**

The focus of my research was examining the racialized experiences of day laborers in post-Katrina New Orleans. Yet, there are many who are interested in learning more about the perspectives of day labor hiring from the employers' point of view. For instance, how does "race" impact employers' decisions in the hiring process? This is certainly a valid and important aspect of day laboring, which I did not examine in this dissertation. I believe it would have been difficult for me to speak with employers about these processes. As a matter of fact, because of my involvement with day labor organizing and advocating for the rights of workers, employers often saw me on the corners and, I believe, would have been less likely to speak with me because of this situation. I spoke with employers a few times when addressing wage theft, or nonpayment, and through these experiences I was able to determine that employers kept a guard up when speaking with me about hiring Latino immigrants.

### **Future Research**

This dissertation began three years after Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans. The process of rebuilding that followed the storm and who was involved in the process deserve further examination. Consequently, I plan to continue my research in New Orleans, with special examination to the criminalization of Latino immigrants in post-Katrina New Orleans. During my time in New Orleans I was privy to the Congreso's efforts toward challenging and fighting against the hyper-surveillance, and policing of Latino immigrants. Latino immigrants are often stopped by sheriff or police officers for minor traffic violations, for instance, and instead of receiving a traffic ticket they are

taken into custody. Likewise, the Congreso has been challenging the Orleans Sheriff's department abuse of authority, and keeping Latino immigrants detained over the required and authorized amount of time. Arguably, immigration and immigrant status remain imbued by race and racist actions.

I also plan to continue examining the organizing efforts of day laborers in post-Katrina New Orleans. Organizing around issues of immigrant and workers' rights remain at the forefront of social change and collective action throughout the U.S. In New Orleans these issues are ever-present and the challenges of economic, racial, and social justice are a part of the work I plan to contribute to.

During fall 2008, the day labor corners of New Orleans began to witness changes in the number of workers seeking employment. Indeed, during spring 2009 workers began to return to their countries of origin as the national and global economies began to take a turn for the worst. Reconstruction work in New Orleans also began to slow down, and while some workers moved to other parts of the country there were others who decided to return home. Consequently, I plan to travel to Honduras, where the majority of day laborers in New Orleans are from, and interview workers upon their return. I plan to analyze the re-integration of Honduran return migrants into the Honduran labor market. What working conditions, jobs, and occupations are return migrants participating in?

I also plan to examine the transmission of social remittances (Levitt 1998) by day laborers to folks in their communities. Social remittances are "the ideas, behaviors, identities, and social capital that flow from receiving-to-sending-country communities"



(Levitt 1998:926). I am particularly interested in the work experiences remitted and if these affect the future migration of return migrants' counterparts. Likewise, what social remittances are exchanged in terms of the racialized experiences lived by day laborers in New Orleans. How have workers' experiences with racism in the U.S. affected their life experiences in their countries of origin?

### **Policy Implications**

Furthermore, this study provides us with a number of policy implications. Some of the concerns raised throughout the dissertation address the importance of the basic human rights and dignity of immigrant laborers in the U.S. The exploitation of immigrant workers—and other workers of color—remains a central part and function of the labor market in the U.S. Post-Katrina day laborers are no exception. They often have less leverage when addressing issues of harassment, abuses in the workplace, and the theft of wages because the majority of workers are undocumented Latino immigrants. Today, in the U.S., immigration issues remain a highly contested and divisive topic among politicians and the public at large. Yet, in New Orleans, through community organizing efforts, day laborers are challenging the unjust treatment of immigrant workers. Indeed, New Orleans day laborers, and immigrants throughout the country, are demanding that their voices be heard. In New Orleans day laborers are reframing their position in the city as reconstruction workers and addressing the structural and systemic inequalities (e.g., race-ethnicity, immigration status, poverty) that maintain them at the bottom rungs of the social, racial, and economic ladder. Likewise, they are learning more about the lives of other disenfranchised communities in the U.S. and about the experiences and

realities of Black New Orleanians. As a result, they are building alliances with other disenfranchised workers, and with Black New Orleanians, particularly those whose fight is centered on fair housing rights in the city.

Day laborers are continuously framing and centering their issues as those of basic human rights and dignity for workers. This leads us to examine the issues of wage theft and the designation of safe employment spaces. First, with the assistance and guidance of the NOWCRJ, day laborers have previously addressed the issue of wage theft in post-Katrina New Orleans. Indeed, with assistance from legal counsel and community organizers, day laborers assisted in developing ideas to fight wage theft and in the creation of an anti-wage theft ordinance that was presented to the members of the New Orleans city council. This, I believe, gave day laborers confidence in uniting together as a community of workers, and also provided them with the opportunity to build alliances with members of other organizations throughout the city. As I was leaving New Orleans the wage theft ordinance was being reviewed by city council members and the district attorney's office. I later found out that city council members, the district attorney, and members of other organizations in the city were unable to reach an agreement on the anti-wage theft ordinance. However, the ordinance remains a priority for workers, and it centers on the issue of workers' rights and dignity, immigration status as a non-factor when placing a wage theft complaint, and issues of retaliation by employers. The latter deals with the use of police and ICE as a method of retaliation, or threat, against day laborers who file wage theft complaints against employers. All of these factors were named as serious concerns by day laborers. This goes to show the importance and

relevance of bring in the voices and experiences of day laborers to the forefront when creating policies that affect them.

Another issue that remains at the forefront of policy implications for day laborers is the issue of “safe spaces.” Day laborers in New Orleans proper search for work in open-air spaces and do not have “safe” designated hiring spots. Consequently, the creation of day labor centers, or designated hiring sites, have previously been purposed in New Orleans. Indeed, before I arrived in New Orleans a day labor center was to be rented out across from a heavily policed day labor corner. However, the residents of the neighborhood were not completely in favor of this and the renting situation fell through. As of today, there are no established day labor centers in New Orleans proper. However, day laborers in Gretna, Louisiana (the Westbank) with assistance and support from the mayor of Gretna and the NOWCRJ have successfully created a designated safe hiring spot or day labor center for workers. This space is run by day laborers. Indeed, the creation of day laborers centers is a heavily contested issue (Camou 2009a, 2009b). As I previously mentioned in Chapter VI, the creation of these centers may hold different meaning and use for day labor organizers than for the workers themselves (Camou 2009a, 2009b). Day labor or community organizers may propose day labor centers in order to create “safe” spaces and a collective identity that works toward fighting for social justice issues. Yet, day laborers may not be as interested in centers for these purposes but, instead view centers as a way at arriving at material gains (Camou 2009a, 2009b). In New Orleans day laborers remain attuned to the need of “safe” spaces, yet other issues, such as wage theft and the policing of Latino immigrants

in New Orleans, are taking precedence over day labor centers at this time. Still, it is important to remain clear of what the needs of day laborers are, and have them lead the way when day labor centers are proposed in an area. There needs to be a shifting of the power dynamics, with workers being empowered and leading the way toward social, economic and racial justice in their communities.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina the blatant and stark reality of white racism was experienced by Black New Orleanians and by those rebuilding it—Latino/a immigrants. The ever present color-line and white-on-black oppression of the United States came to clear view in the aftermath of the storm. Today, on the eve of the fifth anniversary of Katrina, Latino/a immigrants are fighting for their rights to remain in New Orleans. They have rebuilt New Orleans, have made it a part of their lives, their homes and many remain steadfast in their rights for social, racial, and economic justice in a city they helped rebuild.

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